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BIG SPECIAL ISSUE—ALL STORIES NEW & COMPLETE

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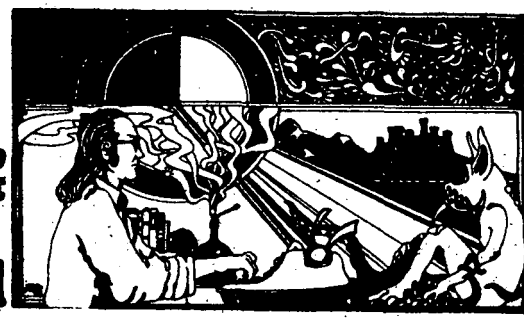
TED WHITE editorial



LAST ISSUE I remarked upon a popular fantasy series (John Norman's *Gor* series) which I found unappealing in both prose and tone. This issue I'd like to comment upon a work of fantasy which I enjoyed quite a good deal more.

The book is a major bestseller—and for precisely that reason I avoided it for some time. (Call it perversity on my part, but when a book has assumed the proportions of a fad I usually avoid it. Once the fad has peaked I will sometimes investigate it. In this case—as in some others—my unwillingness to join the herd has resulted in my discovery of a worthwhile reading experience rather late in the game.) I am speaking of Richard Adams' 1972 novel, *Watership Down*.

I waited until I could pick up a paperback copy of the book, and the edition I purchased (Avon 19810; $2.25; 478 pp.) has bannered across the top, "AMERICA'S #1 BESTSELLER!" Also on the cover is a quote from *Newsweek's* Peter Prescott (whom some of you will recall I took to task in AMAZING a couple of years ago for his snotty attitude toward science fiction): "I cannot imagine that any sensible reader could come away from this novel unaffected and unchanged." For once I agree with Prescott.

Watership Down is a remarkable work in several respects. One which will impress many fantasy fans is its similarity in tone and construction to Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings*. That is to say, although the book does not deal with the themes Tolkien explored—Good vs. Evil and the effect of such a battle upon a humble person like Frodo; the effect upon one of the use of magic—Adams' rabbits (although true to his conception of rabbits) bear more than passing resemblence to Tolkien's hobbits, and the journey they undergo in the first part of the book reminds one of the journey the hobbits undertook in the first volume of *Lord of the Rings*. It is no coincidence, I am sure, that both authors were British, for both reveal their love of both the English countryside and its folk, whether transmoglified into hobbits in the Shire or rabbits on the downs. Both create in their characters a basic decency with which we find it easy to identify.

Watership Down has created for itself a unique niche in literature—at once fantasy (rabbits, if they converse at all, do not do so in the easy English idioms of *Watership Down;* nor is that the extent of the fantasy in the novel, as I'll get to in a moment) and naturalistic in the way in which *Bambi* (the book; not the movie) was

(cont. on page 119)

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THE CASE OF THE MOTHER-IN-LAW-OF-PEARL

AVRAM DAVIDSON

Avram Davidson last appeared in these pages with his novel, "The Forges of Nainland Are Cold" (August and October, 1972). He returns with the first of the Enquiries of Doctor Eszterhazy (another will follow next month): a story which might at first glance belong more properly in Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine, *but the curious background of which removes it from such mundane provinces as mystery magazines. Enter, if you will, a world not unlike our own (but not* our *own) in a year early in its 20th century. . .*

IT WAS A BRIGHT afternoon after much rain and Doctor Eszterhazy decided to take the steam runabout on the fashionable three turns along the Motor Road in the great Private Park. He had put on his duster and was reaching for his cap when the day-porter came in.

"Yes, Lemkotch."

"Sir Doctor, Housekeeper asks if you would be so graciously kind as to leave this here off at Weitmondl, in the Golden Hart, to be prepared," and he set down a box upon the desk, bowed, and withdrew.

If the housekeeper's master had been a boss butcher or an advocate of the Court of First Jurisdiction, he would probably have said, "What, damn it, does the woman think I am a messenger boy?" but as he was Engelebert Eszterhazy, Doctor of Medicine, Doctor of Jurispurdence, Doctor of Science, Doctor of Philosophy, and Doctor of Literature, he merely said, "Yes, of course." He took up the box—it was a small one, inlaid, with part of the inlay missing and part about to be, evidently a sewing-box: and he put it in his pocket.

His manservant, Herrek, sat beside him, ringing the large bronze bell; Schwebel, the retired railroadman, sat behind, carefully stoking the fire. They were trying out a new fuel which Eszterhazy had been working on for some time now—the late Count Tunk and Tunk, for many years Consul

Illustrated by RICHARD OLSEN

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for the Triune Monarchy at Boston in the American province of Nevengland, had been enamored of a tree called hickory and had planted thousands on his estates in Transbalkania and the Gothic Midlands: but the present Count found that he could make no commercial use of the wood, which was not known in East Central Europe—Eszterhazy, an old schoolmate of Count Béo Tunk and Tunk, desired to see if brickquets, made of the hickory sawdust, might not be an utile fuel.

"Nothing to lose," Count Beo had said, with a shrug. "All that my stewards hear, they say, when they offer the wood for sale, is a variation on the phrase, 'Ai—or, 'Yoi'—"Us never hear of no *khickory* tree,' and that, of course, is that. But if we call it say—" here he paused, at a loss as what to call it, say:

"*Tunkfuel,*" said Eszterhazy. "*Tunkfuel, Patént-Amerikánsko.*"

The Count had thought that Tunkfuel, American Invention, was an excellent idea; and so did his friend: but the former had nothing in mind but an economic use for a crop planted out of sentiment, and the latter hoped to devise something which might tend to retrench the reprehensible increase—slight but evident—in the use of hydrocarbon vehicles. He was aware that even many steam-propelled road vehicles used either kerosene or naphtha, or both, to say nothing of the ones powered entirely by petroleum-derivatives: but steadfastly preferred fuels less offensive to eye and nostril. They might be preferable to coal iself; other than that, he had nothing to say for them.

As though to prove his point for him, he observed, some streets ahead, the enormous vehicle of Glutlovicx the sweets-magnate. The magnate himself had no social ambitions, but as his wife could not be persuaded to be happy in a brand-new castle set in the semi-exact center of forty thousand acres of sugar beets (the *exact* exact center was occupied by the refinery), Gutlovics, with a shrug, had agreed to move to Bella. There he had, among other things apparently needful for the happiness of Frow G., acquired a motor-vehicle. Neither one had any other standard of judging the value of new things save by cost and size: their motor was a hydrocarbon talley-ho, and, as they rode along, enabled them to look into the windows on the second floors of buildings. Glutlovicx always looked to see if his sweets, his sugars, or his preserves were on the tables; she only looked at her reflection in the mirrors or the windows.

And as always, driving along, Eszterhazy at the tiller, Herrek tirelessly tolled the bell. This not only alerted nervous pedestrians to get out of the way, it enabled drivers of nervous horses to make necessary adjustments of the

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reins—even, if deemed needful—to jump down and take the horse by the head. Sometimes bystanders had thought it funny to see a horse rear upon hind legs and whinny: but the horse had not thought it funny: sometimes horses had gone mad with fear and dashed up on the sidewalks and spilled drivers or passengers and trampled people; and sometimes they had galloped through the new-fasioned plates of window-glass, slashing themselves so that they had to be destroyed.

But such incidents were now becoming less frequent.

AFTER THE TRADITIONAL three turns around the Motor Road, Eszterhazy drew off to the side. "How is the new fuel behaving, Stoker?" he asked. (It would perhaps have been fashionable to have addressed him in the French equivalent, but Schewebel, for one thing, would not have known what *chauffeur* meant; and, for another, was very proud of having been what he had been on the Royal and Imperial Ironroads S.-P.-T.)

"Sir: a hot fire, a clean smoke, a clean ash," he answered.

"Good, good. Very well, let us change places. The Court of the Golden Hart."

The boiler required no fresh fuel for a while now, and, even if it had, Eszterhazy might have stoked it without soiling white gloves, so cleanly the new fuel was.

The interior of Weitmondl's consisted chiefly of drawers, shelf after shelf of them, up to the ceiling; moving ladders ran on wheels along rails, and someone seemed always restocking the drawers or else taking stock out: and each drawer had in its front a little window, as it were, containing samples of the size and style of button contained within.

One of the clerks from aloft called something into the back, and the proprietor himself appeared. Seligman Weitmondl was himself a little blanched almond of a man, who managed to be serious and cheerful at the same time. He took the sewing box from Eszterhazy with small crows and clucks of pleasurable recognitoion. "Oh yes, oh yes! Done in my father's day, my father's day," he affirmed. "That was the style, then, lozenge-work, lozenge-work," he said, tapping the inlay with his finger. "*Cheap* stuff," he said, a moment later.

Eszterhazy looked at it more closely. The nacre seemed indeed faint, the opalescence rather dim. "It does not appear to be the highest quality of mother-of-pearl," he conceded. "Although I might have supposed it had merely faded—"

Weitmondl chuckled. "Faded here, faded there," he said; "it wasn't bright and it didn't fade. It isn't even mother-of-pearl, be blessed, my dear Sir: it's what we in the trade call mother-in-law-of pearl. It doesn't come from the

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South Sea or the North Sea or the Gulfs of Persia or the Gulfs of Anywhere-else. It comes from a mere river-mussle, somewhere in the Blox-Major. And if you had come to us last week, I'd have had to say, 'No Sir, we can no longer repair the article in the same material for the reason that we haven't got it in stock and haven't had it in stock for long years, long years.' " And he nodded seriously. And, seemingly out of nowhere, perhaps from each nostril, he produced two shells. "*This* one, you see at once, dear Sir, is mother-of-pearl, the real and genuine article: look at it: Beautiful. Though not from Persia, to be sure, from Australia, which is a large island, my dear Sir, to the south of Persia— And *this* one, you see at once the difference, my dear Sir, day and night, day and night, is the river-mussel, such as we used to get in as a staple, ever so much cheaper, of course."

And, sometimes stimulated by questions, and sometimes volunteering the data, Seligman Weitmondl went on to explain, for one thing, the price of standard quality mother-of-pearl had come down—owing to the opening of new grounds in such places as Australia and the South Seas—and the purchasing power of the public had gone up, owing to manufacturing, railroads, abolition of the octroi, the defeat of the Serbians and the Grasutarkers, benevolent laws, and the immense benign influences of the Throne—consequently the demand for the cheaper article had dropped. "Nobody would buy it anymore, it took a long time for us to sell out what we had on hand, soldiers wouldn't even buy it in snuffboxes for their sweethearts, you see. And *then*, then when, what with one thing and another, we could have sold some items in the cheaper material, why, we couldn't get it anymore."

Eszterhazy, his mild curiosity desiring to have the matter wrapped up, asked *why* they couldn't get it anymore? And the button-maker, with a shrug and a smile, said They hadn't brought it in. They? The dealers. That is, the dealers in such odds and ends—he implied that the odds were very odd, coming as they did from the ends of the Empire. Until the previous week. When one of the They had brought a lot of it in.

"So we should have this repaired and ready for the Dear Sir in very short order. Say two weeks?"

Eszterhazy said two weeks. Weitmondl smiled, bowed, withdrew. Eszterhazy was also withdrawing when a voice from above said, "You see, Sir, the lurlies stopped bringing the shells."

Down from one of the movable ladders, where, presumably, he had heard the whole conversation, climbed one of the stock clerks—a man somewhat on in years, with a sallow little face framed in a curl

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of sallow little whiskers.

"The lurlies stopped—?"

The elder clerk now reached the floor, gave a short, stiff bow. "As in that song, Sir, about She combs her golden hair with a golden comb, sitting on the rocks by the river and he feels so sad."

"The lorelie, ah yes, go on." Eszterhazy marveled how the man managed to get every element of the beginning of Heine's beautiful poem into one sentence and in impeccably incorrect order. "But the poem, song, says nothing, surely, of shell—?"

"*It* says nothing. *I* says something. What the song calls, as the Sir says, a lorelie, we-folks back home calls a lurley, which is its correct name. And the old people always say, in the old days, how a lurley will bring ye gold or gems of such things, if you make right with her. But, by and by, don't know what happen, the old people they say 'the lurley stop bringing it,' Sir, you see."

"And now have started, again?"

The old clerk's only response was to call, as he moved the ladder further along the wall of drawers, "Number Twenty-two twenty, Coachman Gloves, two dozen short!"

MORE THAN ONCE Eszterhazy had noticed that, once an idea or a notion had entered his mind, not long afterwards something bearing upon it would enter his ken in some material way. Whether, by only thinking about it, he had released it—so to speak—into the Universal Aether, where it would grow and send forth intangible but none-the-less effective 'tentacles,' or whether, contrariwise, someone else had implanted it in the Aether by thinking about it, and so forth . . . . but he had never completed the concept. Nor could he tell why, now, he felt his eyes more than once straying to the telephone instrument in one corner of his room; or why he seemed to feel a sort of straining in his ears. Again and again he bent to his work, again and again he looked up from it: looked through the Swedish crystal-glass at the huge dry-cell batteries within the mahogany telephone-case. And it was with a sense of great relief that he did hear, at last, the clear, brisk tinking of the instrument's bell.

"Eszterhazy is here," he announced into the mouthpiece.

A voice asked him if he would graciously attend another moment "to faciliate a far-distant call." In another moment, more-or-less, a second voice, somewhat weaker in volume, identified itself as the Avar-Ister exchange, and made the same request. After a somewhat longer wait, a somewhat even more distant voice proclaimed itself as "Second Princely Fortress of the Pious and Loyal Velotchshtchi"—in other words, Vlox-Minor—it had not quite finished when an other voice, entirely different in tone and qual-

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ity, broke in to say, "Engli, this is Roldri Mud," and all—or, at any rate, much—became clear.

Official maps of the Triune Monarchy bore none of those curious sad cross-hatchings, likelier to be found on maps of South America, and which mean—the key at the bottom informs us—*Disputed Territory.* Nevertheless. While some matters were certainly undisputed—the Romanou had never penetrated to the Gothic Highlands, for instance; the Slovatchko made no claims to Central Pannonia—*nevertheless,* there was not a single component nation-state of the Empire around whose borders things did not tend to become somewhere and in some measure subject to confusion, ethnicism, linguistic-nationalistic conflicts, and appeals to the tribunal of history: woe-betide whoever must bring his case to that much-crowded court!

Long ago the Goths and the Avars had fought along the Sable River—but the famous *Komprómis* of the Year '60 had declared the area to form a part of Vlox-Minor, and so it still stood. To this district the Avars had in their customary fashion affixed one of their ponderous and polysyllabic names, meaning (in this case) 'Estuary of the dark river where grow many reeds of the quality used for weirs and baskets'; the Goths, in their own fashion, had termed it 'Mud.' To be sure, the Vloxfolk doubtless had another name for it: but enough.

And all this area was the property of the Princes von Vlox, who, with their sixty-four *proven* quarterings of nobility, their boresome plethora of available names and titles (*Fitz-Guelf zu Borbon-Stuart,* as exemplum), disdained not to describe themselves, in the person descendant of Charlemagne and the Lusignan kings of Cyprus, of Prince Roldrando, as Lord of Mud. The fens had in large part been reticulated and drained a century back, and constituted some of the richest farmland in the Monarchy. Probably sixty-four banks bulged with the quit-rents of the Lords of Mud, but one seldom saw them in Bella, even, let alone Paris or Monte Carlo: and legend pictured them as having returned altogether to the primitive, lolling about on rush-strewn floors, guzzling bread-beer, clad in wolf-skins.

"Ah, Roldri," Eszterhazy said, aloud, "the lurlies have begun to bring up pearl-shell again after all this time—eh?"

And Prince Roldrando, his voice like an organ-note, said, "Ah . . . *then you already know.* . . . ."

PRINCE ROLDRANDO was not wearing wolfskins, that had been a misunderstanding, he was wearing shaggy Scottish tweeds of such antique design that they must have been cut for a father or an uncle; and they had not been recently cleaned or pressed. "Damndest

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story you ever heard, Engli," he said, as easily as he—a moment later—pointed out the Stationmaster's office "—if you want to wash-up—" —the door of the public place of convenience, brightly painted with the internationally-recognized double-zero and W.C., he ignored as though it was not four feet away, and perhaps, inscribed in Hittite. "—or, we can stop by the roadside," he offered an alternate suggestion.

"I won't ask if you had a good journey," he went on, "one never has a good journey by the cars, if the window is shut one swelters, if the window is open one gets cinders in one's eyes." Baggage had been picked up by two attendants, one of whom wore a footman's coat and the other a footman's hat: the trousers of both, as well as those of Prince Roldrando, gave evidence that a deer or boar had recently been killed, drawn, and flayed.

Very recently.

"Lunch in the hamper, whenever you like," said the host, with a gesture. And, with another gesture, "Care to take the coachman's seat?"

"Where is the coachman?" asked the guest.

"Coachman? There's no coachman," the Prince said, mildly surprised. "Do you think you're in Bella?"

Sure enough. One of the attendants vaulted onto the near horse—it *had* been saddled!—gave a gutteral growl—both horses sprang forward—the servant playing the role of tiger uttered a bloodcurdling squawl (no bronze bells hereabouts!)—the Town of the Princely Fortress (etc.) flashed by. Eszterhazy murmured to himself a few words from his favorite guide-and-phrase-book, *"Help! My postilion has been struck by lightning!"*

Prince Roldrando turned a face twisted with astonishment and concern, his golden-brown eyes wide. "Too-*bad*!" he exclaimed. "Oh, why *did*n't he wear a *charm*?" Then, in an instant, the eyes vanished, the face split into a half-a-hundred wrinkles, the mouth exploded into laughter. "*Ha–ha!* Oh, you had me there! Postillion struck by lightning, he says! Oh, Oh, sweet little Saint Peter in Chains!" And he rolled about in such a manner as to give Eszterhazy the most extreme concern for his safety: Prince Roldrando, however, did not fall off the coach, and neither did he forget the phrase: from time to time during his friend's visit—and, indeed, often at the oddest times—he would repeat it, the words usually varying in their order, until, at last, it passed into the common speech of the district as a sort of byword, as it might be, "May the black pox pass us over and may our postillions ne'er be struck by lightnings. . . ."

The farmhouses of the Vlox countryside were painted in an absolutely Mediterannean profu-

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sion of colors—pink, yellow, brown with white trimmings, green with white trimmings, blue, lavendar with brown trimmings: and many, many other shades, tints, permutations, combinations—as though to make up in splendor what they lacked in straightness of line. Presently the houses began to thin out, and the real and still untamed Mud spread out on both sides and all about.

The road itself was lined with trees, but through the trees one could see nothing but an endless expanse of marsh: water, reeds, hummocks, water, blue sky, white clouds, canals, here and there a man in a flat-bottomed boat . . . and, everywhere, everywhere, sometimes floating on the surface of a pool, sometimes diving and bobbing for food, sometimes wheeling and screaming, sometimes conducting a parliamentary inquiry in a clump of trees: the birds . . . . more birds than Eszterhazy had ever seen in one place before, certainly more birds than he could identity . . . although, like a familiar *motif* recurrantly introduced into some half-wild sort of symphony, there were often swans. Sometimes they sailed majestically upon the waters. And sometimes they squatted like pigs in the mudbanks.

Prince Von Vlox, who had fallen silent, suddenly sat up. Eszterhazy followed his host's gaze.

Through a fortuitous gap in the trees, Castle Vlox could be seen, perhaps less than a kilometer away: and it seemed to float upon the surface of the waters as though designed for a pageant out of some insubstantial substance. It had, seemingly, everything a castle traditionally should have: walls, a gate, a drawbridge, a moat, towers.

"How often one thinks," Eszterhazy said, musingly, "that a castle must be upon a high hill, a peak. That they often were, had nothing to do with any desire for scenery or prospects, vistas. It is clear that the marshes afforded every bit as much protection to this place as any mountain top. It has a moat, to be sure, but the Mud itself is one vast moat. . . ."

Prince Roldrando gave a rich, deep chuckle. "Ferdy tried to besiege it once," he said—he, probably the only living person who would even think of referring to that long-dead Holy Roman Emperor by a nickname— "a nice balls-up he made of it, trying to get his engines and his artillery through the Mud! So, after sitting and a-thinking about it a while, he sends word he'll settle for a titular submission—say, the gaffer's sceptre, and a silver bowl. Ha ha! Ah, the gaffer"—here he referred to none other than Sigismudo, Prince Von Vlox, 1520-1583—"the gaffer sends him a copper piss-pot and a gumph-stick, ho ho. . . ." In the 16th century and at this remove from the centers of soft

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living, a copper urinal was after all indeed a luxury of sorts: but a gumph-stick was a mere common appurtenance in every privy which hung out from a castle wall. What "Ferdy" had thought of it all need not trouble conjecture, but hē had certainly never come back.

Eszterhazy gazed at the castle, slowly growing larger, appearing and vanishing as they came nearer and nearer. "It gives one a definite feeling of reassurance," he said, "to know that tales like that are told of this old place. It is certainly neither Castle Dracula nor Castle Frankenstein—"

Roldrando nodded. "As for Vlad Drakulya, he was a Rumanian, need more be said? And the Franckensteins," he said, indulgently, "one hears well of them, they are, after all, *barons,* is what *they* are. After all, *any*body can be made a baron, but nobody can be made a prince; one is either born a prince or one is not, and the personal caprice of a monarch or a minister has nothing to do with it." Eszterhazy was reminded of the Great Duke of Wellington and his comment that what he liked about the Order of the Bath was that "there was no damned nonsense about 'merit' to it!" Such attitudes transcended snobbery. If one were, on one side, descended from the Lusignan kings (one of whom quite casually married a mermaid), and, on the other side descended—somewhat farther back—from Charlemagne, the great-grandson of Big-footed Bertha, *la reine pedauque*—then one either automatically appropriated the Stationsmaster's private *pissoir* or one merely "Stopped by the side of the road"—either one indifferently acceptable.

Prince Roldi took up a battered brass post-horn and blew a blast or two on it. Almost, one expected the draw-bridge to fall and men-at-arms to appear on the battlements. Actually, it was a signal to light the samovar. —The coach rattled over the bridge, and, making one half-turn around the court-yard, came to a stop. Several men half-rose, half-bowed, returned to their duties. Duties which, Eszterhazy noticed, consisted, respectively, of cleaning the latest model shotgun, and of sharpening the head of a boar-spear.

He really did not know if it was the latest model boar-spear.

THEY HAD THE BOAR that night, with wild apple sauce; and with it a wine of the district, one which did not keep and so was never sent for sale: now, between sweet and sour, and slightly effervescent, it might have tempted angels.

Prince Roldi, gazing at the church-ransom of bees-wax candles all a glimmer, improved the vision by regarding it through his glass of wine. "Try it, Engli," he urged. "Do the same. See if you can see the monkey in the glass."

Eszterhazy complied. The

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flames winked, winked, wept, wept. Odd bits of things seemed to come into vision, then fall out of focus again. "The monkey?" he enquired, pleased, pleasantly tired, enjoying his dinner.

" 'Es. We had an old family doctor once. Said he could make monkeys. Long ago. The gaffer didn't want him to make monkeys. Wanted him to make gold, I daresay. *Aw*ful quarrel. Don't know why the gaffer didn't drop him in the sink. —Eh? The sink? Don't you know what the—Ah, the, what do they call it, dunjeon. *We* call it the sink. He didn't though. Chap rode away, swearing the sky sulfur-colored. Ever since then we always say, 'Look through the wine into the flame and you'll see the monkey old Theo made. . . . .' "

It was news indeed to Eszterhazy that Doctor Phillipus Aureolus Theophrastus Bombastus von Hohenheim, called Paracelcus, had ever come this way. Sooner or later, he thought, *must* have a look in the library and the archives. Has 'old Theo' actually made him a homunculus here? One hardly knew. Still, the legend—however transmuted—the legend had persisted.

"You have more trouble brewing now, you say, Roldi, than many monkeys might cause. . . . ?" It seemed the right moment to broach the cask.

It was.

"Yes . . . . damn it. . . ." The prince sat up, set down his glass, and shook his head. "If 'tisn't settled, there'll be no buckwheat. If there's no buckwheat, then they'll start eating the wheat and the potatoes. If they eat the wheat and the potatoes, then they'll not be having enough to make vodka. And if they'll not be having enough to make vodka, they'll have to be *buy*ing vodka. —And the Vloxi, may the Almighty God of Heaven and Earth defend us from evil, when the Vloxi start *buying* vodka. . . . ."

Eszterhazy had made only the first, faintest of beginning at an understanding. It would not do to push, it never *did* do to push. *Any*where. So he said one sole word. "*Lurley?*"

"So they *say*—" His friend pushed his hands through his hair, sighed. "So *they* say. . . ."

After a moment. "And you say. . . ?"

The prince shrugged. "Perhaps it's not a lurley. Perhaps it's—perhaps she is . . . an undine. . . ."

Candles weeping golden-brown tears. Guest saying nothing. Waiting, waiting. Sipping the rich red wine. Thinking of old thoughts. Of old beliefs . . . could one indeed call them 'old' when they were so evidently still being believed? After a long, long wait, and a long, long sigh, Prince Roldrando said, "Maybe she is an undine. Maybe one that old Theo made. Let go loose, out of anger, you know, with our gaffer. And so, maybe . . . maybe she's been waiting . . . waiting . . . ever

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since. . . . ."

Sweet scent of beeswax, mingled with sweet scent of wild apples.

What century were they living in now, here, on the wild border marches of the Vlox, where the Avars and the Goths alike had left their bones to moulder and their spear-heads to rust and their ghosts, their still-vexed and angry ghosts, to wander, muttering and unshriven. . . . ?

"Because, you see, Engli, the old story of old King Baldwin's bride? You know what the common-folk say about old King Baldwin's bride?" Eszterhazy was fairly sure the story had not been originally told about old King Baldwin, but it was of the same blood; he summed the long and uncanny story up in a few words: How the noble lord had wedded a beautiful and a strange woman, how her only condition was that she must never be seen to bathe. How for some several years the marriage had been happy enough, until . . . . one ill-fated day . . . the husband coming home unexpectedly (ah, those eternal stories of husbands and their fatally-unexpected returns!), and hearing sounds of song and of the splashing of water, had dared to break his own word . . . had espied his wife in her bath . . . espied, over the side of the tub, her glistening, glittering mermaids's tail. . . . .

"Yes. . . . Yes. . . . Such is the common story. But it's not the true story, you see. We know it. We of the family. She wasn't a mere mermaid, you see. She was an undine. He spied her, she sprang out, and into the moat, and thence to the open flood. But they often used to be hearing her, wailing for her children. Es. An undine. She wedded him—for what? Gold? Hadn't she, hadn't they *all* of them gold enough, and silver and jewels as well, there at the bottom, where the rich ships sank? Ah, no, you know, what it is that undines want: a soul, a soul, is what undines want! She wedded him to gain a soul by reason of the Christian wedding, you know that, for the undine has no soul to start with. . . .

"And so maybe this is what she's come for. Come back for. Is waiting for. . . . ." The prince's voice droned on in the growing darkness, the last lights of the sunken day sinking into the horizon behind it, the candles sinking wetly into their sockets.

Eszterhazy felt his head snap up. Therefore, it must have dropped upon his bosom. A day's travel by train and by coach. The full belly, stuffed with roast boar. The monotone narration. Narration stopped. Had Roldi noticed this breach of manners? What was the last thing he'd said? Ah. . . .

"Waiting for her soul, eh?" the guest said.

"No. No." The host nodded emphatically. "Not her soul. She hasn't *got* a soul. Don't you see.

"She's waiting for a soul, all

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right. *But it's* my *soul she is waiting for. . . . .!*"

EPHRAIM THE TRADER was clad in velveteens, worn, clean velveteens. Tied at the knee in clumps of cords. His cross-gaiters. In Bella, such costume had not been seen off-stage in half-a-century. Here it was a suit of working-clothes. And the man and his trade was as archaic, in terms of imperial commerce, as his costume. But he was a man for all of that, and a civil man, too. It did not occur to him, as it often seemed to occur to others in this country scene—and in others, for that matter—that the stranger from the big city was asking him about his own affairs for an ill purpose certain to involve the country fellow's loss—or, what was just as bad: the stranger's gain!

"Weel, sir [the traider said], I have four sisters. And tis our custom to dower them, not with much money, for our trade here doesn't bring in much money, we don't hunger or go in rags, but we don't find ourselves with much in the way of cash. My old Dad, he give the girls furniture and featherbedding and of course they already has their own linens in their chests. And my old dad, he gives the bridegroom a gold watch and a chain, as is the custom with us. Well sir, as I say, I've got four sisters, long may they live, and after the third, Estella was her name, After she was wedded off, twas like the house had suffered a fire. Oh, how she wept, 'Father, Father, don't forget me!'—and afterwards my old dad he says, in his wry way, 'Forget her, how can I forger her, she's tooken the last stick of furniture and the last feathertick off the pads!' And yet there was the fourth sister, Marrianna, well, *she* gets betrothed, and there *was* a problem, how our old dad he did weep. 'A shame to my name,' he sayd. 'I've got not a groushek nor a bedstool to dower her with, not to mention the gold watch and chain for the bridegroom,'—had I mentioned the gold watch and chain for the bridegroom, Sir?"

Eszterhazy listened patiently. A prosecutor or an examining magistrate might—at least in fiction—allow himself the luxury of asking crisp, incisive questions: short: to the point. But an enquirer such as himself, a stranger, among a strange-enough people, and involved in as strange a matter as this one—the best thing by far was simply to start with a general subject and then to listen. And listen and listen.

And listen. . .

"Well, Sir, we are not like how we hear the children in the cities are, we respect our old elders, our gaffers, as we say, and it pains us to see them weep. So I says, 'Dad, never fear, I'll help thee.' And I gets in the wagon and off I goes, not half-knowing as to where, to tell the truth; and then it bethinks me. 'No one has been

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down along the little river of late years, so off with thee, Emphraim, and see what God may send thee.' And among other things He sends me, Sir, is a whacking great pile of mussel shell, and so that's the story, Sir."

Someone, somehow, must have brought word to old Hakim the River Tartar, that a Highborn Guest was coming, for not only was rude hospitality already prepared on the table—a much scratched old pewter plate piled with nuts and mulberries, a jug of milk, a pile of flatbread on a clean cloth—but the old man had put on his embroidered caftan: for usually the River Tartars, those few who remained—usually they wore the cast-downs of the local Rag Market. The River Tartars had forgotten most of their own tongue without ever having gathered much mastery of the common speech. The old man muttered a long greeting which had once, perhaps, been current in the Courts of Karakorum. Then he pulled a boy from behind him, and shoved the lad forward. There was no robe for the lad, perhaps had been none such for a century. But the boy's rags were at any rate clean.

"Where me get the shell? Me get she from the lurleygirly." Broken, the boy's speech, but straightforward enough. "Me see a great pile of't by Lurley Bend, and me leave a bowl of milk one time and me take some shell, wrap up in me sark," he gestured and he grinned; stripping off his shirt had evidently posed no problem, likely he went most ways and most days in his breech-clout, no more. "And a nex' day me go, take some more shell, leave some more milk, and a next day me go," and so on and so on. " 'Es, me pay milk, take shell. 'Nen come pedlar-khan and give me crockery and we trade crockery for we don't be needin' it, us eats outen table-holes. 'Es, us trades it for salt and matches and lamp-oil, an'—"

Eszterhazy barely followed. To Joachim-the-Groom (thus to distinguish him from Joachim-the-Smith, Joachim-the-Shrewd, Joachim-Cuckold, and a few score more) he said, "Ask how he knows it was a lurley?"

The old Tartar-man answered, in some surprise at the question. "Why, it be find to Lurley Bend, who else, me khan, would leave it shell there?"

But the boy had a word of his own. "Me do see she, all a-bare!"

The gaffer clouted his shaven pate, "For shame! *Giaour!*"

Perhaps the clout, perhaps the guffaw which Groom-Joachim had not felt able to constrain—well, for whatever reason, the boy had no more to say. They sipped the sour milk, pecked at the mulberries, put some bread and some nuts into their pockets, and left something beneath the cloth—at least Eszterhazy did—something which was no salt or matches or lamp-oil. And, with bows here

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and there, they departed.

Riding away, on the heavy horses whose feet were so accustomed to the mud, Eszterhazy asked, "Have these mussels any other use, Joachim?"

The groom scratched his beard. "Aye, Sir Doctor. Can be eaten."

"Ah. And how do you eat them?"

A shocked look was his first answer. "*I*? Ah, Sir Doctor, *I* don't eat them!"

"Oh. So. Who does, then?"

Again, a sidelong look. Another scratch at the beard. "The lurley, then." said Joachim-the-Groom.

THE MAP of the area, as it hung in the office of the Bailiff (half tack-room, half gun-room, another half of it somehow made shift to serve for business: if there are not three halves in one whole in most places, be sure that the Mud is not one of them) of the Estate, might not have passed inspection at the Royal and Imperial Institute of Cartography. But it sufficed to locate the cove of the little river—

"Does it have a name, Bailiff?"

"Does, Sir Doctor."

A silence.

A sigh.

"And what, then, is its name, Bailiff?

"It's name? It's name is Little River, Sir Doctor."

—The cove called Lurley Bend had, so far as could be recalled, always been called that. There seemed no local legends of any golden-haired sirens sitting on rocks and luring men to their certain deaths there. There seemed, in fact, no local legends about it at all—save the one local legend, so strange and totally unfamiliar to Eszterhazy, that the appearance of the lurley meant certain death to the buckwheat crop.

"It's certain death to the buckwhat crop," Prince Roldrando burst out, "if you will all neglect to tend it!"

The Bailiff said nothing, but one of the older men, wagging his head, said, respectfully, but nonetheless doggedly, "Ah, me Lord Prince, tis easy for you to say, but tis a known fact that whenever there is a lurleygirly in the river, us buckwheat crop do blight and die: and then us have no kasha for the winter, lulladay!"

His lord prince pointed out, again, that the only certain fact was that the buckwheat had to be tended: but this brought nothing but a certain clarification, to wit, that if anyone were to dare to tend the buckwheat while the lurleygirly was in the river, he or she or they would be so doing incur certain death.

It was certain, to be sure, that buckwhat was the staple food-stuff for the winter thereabouts. Some wheat was saved to make bread, some potatoes were saved for the borsht, much wheat and potatoes went to pay rent or be sold for cash (or, likelier, to pay against credit): the main use for wheat and potato, however, as far the

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fact of good crops of either one gladdening the hearts of the farmer-folk, was that much of both went into the making of the local vodka. To have used wheat alone would have seemed a wanton extravagance; to have used potatoes only would have seemed a degree of coarseness to which they were unwilling to descend. They sought a balance, and—usually—they found it.

And if, instead of bowl after bowl of familiar buckwheat grits winterday after winterday, if, instead of this, they had needs fill their bellies with bread, with potato—why, a two-fold sadness would surely come upon them: One—no kasha; Two—no home-made vodka. None of this meant, of course, that they would do without vodka! The very thought was alien, would have brought unbelieving grunts. But sometimes the buckwheat failed for natural reasons. The results were familiar to all. One sold what one could—sometimes the wife's gold trinkets—and the wife never cared for that—or the silver-frames of the ikons—and one went to town to buy town-made vodka. And, once in town, once at the tavern, did one—could one—have a quiet and thoughtful sip, as one always did at home? Never a bit of it. There was always the urging to pass the pint around . . . . to stand someone else a round . . . before one knew it, the pint was gone . . . . so quickly! . . . .

And then, one by one: the wagon. The harness. Even the horse.

And then the first fight. And then the second fight. And—

"Ah, Sirs, she lurley ha'been seen up and down the river, yes. 'Tis bad, oh, bad." It was clear that more than one, as Eszterhazy and his princely friend made their rounds, had anticipated whatever might come by dipping into the vodka already. Not only the buckwheat was suffering, the district itself had begun to suffer. The fishermen no longer set their nets, the fowlers feared to go abroad in the ferns.

"Now, Sir," said the fellow whom the Bailiff had sent as guide, "it's just as you follow that bit of path, there, and you come, you are bound to come, as easy as easy, to within sight . . . within sight of. . . ."

"Of Lurley Bend?"

The man threw him a reproachful look. *Speak not the word, lest it come to pass* . . . "Within sight of it," he said, after a nervous swallow, visible and audible. And asked, stiffly, "Will Your Honor be wanting to come back before noon-tide?—or after? What I means is—" What he meant, clearly, was that he had no intention of accompanying Eszterhazy. But was, however, willing to return for him—here. Thus far would he go, and no farther. Eszterhazy shrugged. "Tether the horse, then," he said. "I daresay I can find my way back." And, as

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the man hesitated, painfully, he added, "And if I can't, no doubt the horse knows the way."

How eagerly the man was about to grasp at this easy way out of it! But then, then something which may have been duty, or may have been a fear of something other than the lurley—the prince, perhaps—or may have been honest concern, came over the man's face. It was, God knows (Eszterhazy thought), an honest enough face. The man shook his head. "I shall meet Your Honor here," he said. "At when the shadows are like so," he drew in the soft dirt with his stick. About three hours after noon hour, Eszterhazy calculated. "Surely Your Honor will be here then?" It was less a question than a plea. And then he stayed and watched as his master's guest walked off down the path.

The day was warm, and growing warmer, but here all was cool. Ahead, the trees thinned out. The path was already thinning out, itself. And then the path came to a hollow, and that was the end of the path. It was less a pool than an eddy, less an eddy than a backwater. Flocculent bits of decayed leaves and such floated, dotting the surface and subsurface of the dark water. Ahead, some good way ahead, there was the shine of the unobstructed sun upon the water. The river, then.

Lurley's Bend, then.

He sat down and took out his binoculars. And he waited.

The quality of the light, the quantity of the light, was never the same two seconds in a row. The trees and the bushes wavered in the slow, soft wind; and the light, filtering between and amongst them, wavered with them. Sometimes the air was bright, then it went into flux and turned green. Now one corner was yellow from the sun, and now another. In a way, it was like being under water. And he fell into a sort of revery, in which he was, in deed and fact, underneath the waters. He rose and fell with the waves. And then, from somewhere in the dim and aqueous distances, came the daughter of the wave, the child of the *unda*, of the undulating wave, there came the undine herself. And she—

He had the glasses to his eyes before he realized what he was doing.

The movement was too abrupt. Perhaps the glasses flashed. Far way as the woman was, still, she had noticed. Something, at least, she must have noticed. As swiftly as she had come out of the waters, even more swiftly did she return to them.

But the glimpse, brief as it had been, had been enough.

THERE WERE two or three with their heads together, at the curve of the road. That is, one man, one woman, and one child, straining on her toes. They drew apart as the horse ambled up. One of

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them was his guide. His face went almost weak and loose with the relief on seeing Eszterhazy. "Ah, thank God, Your Honor, well, the horse, and now, although tis nowhere near time," he babbled.

"Well enough, Augsto," said Eszterhazy. "Look here." They looked. "The fact is," he began. "A touch of the sun, you see. Only a touch. No more, but my skin, well, I am a city fellow. I am afraid I don't tan, I may burn. I was wondering. A salve? An ointment? Is a shop around, where such things are sold? An apothecary?" They shook their heads, Noo. . . . Nothing like *that*. . . . Not round *here*. . . And it was the woman's face which first lighted with a sudden thought. As he had known it would.

"Ah, Sir! Ah— The midwife!"

"To be sure, Mamma, the midwife!" the girl echoed. And even Augsto had understood, and, happy that all was well and that the new matter was merely something which could be settled by the administrations of one well-known and familiar, added his own exclamations of, "The midwife, to be sure, Your Honor, the midwife! She does make all salves and such, as well as her tending to the women in their time! And if your Honor will be so kind as to allow, I'll—"

But His Honor declined to be so kind as to allow it. He insisted on being given directions. And, indeed, it was not very far. The woman was tending to her sunflowers, already beginning to droop their heads, so heavy with seed; she was barefoot and had her outer skirt tucked up, showing a perfectly respectable profusion of petticoats. She looked up, bobbed him a courtsey, and waited for him to dismount and enter the yard. A woman with a seamed face, and pale blue eyes. She waited for him to speak.

"I am His Highness's guest," he said. She gave a nod of knowing much—and, indeed, he wondered how much she might really know. He repeated his story, she looked at him, somewhat doubtfully. Then, "If you will step inside, Sir," she said.

The house was as neat as anyone had any right to expect, and smelled of herbs and of flowers and of something cooking on the stove. . .a chicken in paprika sauce, probably. "Well, Sir," she said, still looking at him with the same doubtful expression, "The best thing for sunburn, you know, is simply oil and vinegar, mixed."

"I don't wish to smell like a salad," he said, entirely honestly.

She gave a sudden snort of laughter. Obviously she was in no great awe of him. This might be all to the good. On the other hand—

"Perhaps you have a salve," he suggested.

She nodded, slowly. "I have a number. I suppose the best thing might be the zinc oxide, although—"

Despite himself, he was star-

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tled, he had expected, perhaps, something along the lines of, say, swallow's fat, mixed with the juice of cornflowers plucked in the light (or the dark) of the moon.

"Zinc oxide! What do you know about zinc oxide?"

The look she gave him was heavy with reproof. "I have the diploma of the Provincial School for Midwifery and Nursing, Sir. The late Prince Von Vlox sent me there, he paid my expenses, so that his people should have good care. I know a good deal about zinc oxide, Sir: and a great deal more, besides. . . ."

At once he said, "Then you know who or what was born in these parts about fifteen or sixteen years ago, and is now frightening the present Prince Von Vlox's people into imbecility—don't you think it is time for you to come out in the open with it?"

She threw back her head. If he had expected her—and, half, he had—to break into tears, to sigh or sob or cross herself, well, he was mistaken, to that extent. The pale blue eyes were quite steady. "So, it is her, then," she said, calmly. "I half-thought it might be. I have been thinking. Thinking. Even just now, as you came up, I was thinking. But no clear answer came to me. —But, Sir, have some mercy on her: it is no matter of 'what,' it is a matter of a human child, begotten in secret, to be sure, and born in even more secrecy . . . a child sadly afflicted . . . but a child, a human child all the same. . . ."

"Forgive me that lapse," he said. "Of course you are entirely right. Go on, then. Go on."

Less may be hidden from the midwife than from most, but it can happen, and not seldom does it happen, that even from the widwife a thing may be hidden until the last moment. "I did not want you to see me," the woman had said, tight-lipped, sweat already beginning to break out upon her face. And then the first cry broke. And then the waters broke. And then all such thoughts as secrecy fell into the shadows where all but the essentials fall. And the woman herself began to writhe, as though she herself were a broken thing.

"But for all of that, it was a normal labor," the midwife said. "The *labor* was normal. . . ."

And Eszterhazy said, "The child, though. . . ."

"The flesh of the lower limbs was fused. In appearance, there was but one lower limb. Ah, God, how she did indeed break down at that. I told her, 'Helena, this may very probably be cured through surgery,' but she knew nothing of such things. And she was in agony for her child and said it was a punishment for sin, for her sin in getting the child—"

He said, "Ah. . . ."

The woman shrugged. "I do not sit in judgment. I do not make reports. I did not even tell the priest, he is a monk, if he had been a married priest, well. . . .

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In fact, I told no one. Until now."

He tried to imagine what it must have been like, trying to keep such a secret for such a length of time— Not the midwife: the mother. "Surely the child's mother must have guessed, though," he said. "How could she have escaped hearing? How far into the woods do they live, that the mother hasn't heard these stories, these few past months?"

Said the midwife: "That is it, you see. She died, the mother, I mean, Helena, I mean. She died only a few past months ago."

It took a few seconds for the meaning of it all to be clear to Eszterhazy. Then he said, softly, "Oh, my God. . . ."

To have lived a life, even a life of only fifteen or sixteen years, a life of concealment, even if not complete concealment, to have spent those years pretending to be a cripple in a chair. . . .a chair from which one never moved during daylight hours. . .clad in a dress so long that no one would see . . . or guess . . . or even suspect. . . . A life largely confined to oneself and one's mother: and then, of a sudden stroke: half the world gone out. After a life of being warned, and warned, and warned, "No one must know. . . *No one must ever know–*"

"Well, the rest can wait," he said. "We must find that child. And find her soon. —What is her name?"

The midwife said, "The same as mine. Maria Attanasia. I baptized her. Yes. Find her." She thought a moment, then nodded. "A boat, to begin with."

It was not as hard as one might have thought, nor did it take very long, either. He had one more question, and asked it as they went towards the boat-mooring. "As to the child's father. . . ." He paused. Maria the midwife stopped, swung about. Again the pale blue eyes gazed at him.

"You do not know, then," she said. "I never knew if Helena ever told him. Evidently she did not. —This, too, must wait."

She would not let him in the boat. The child, she said, must not be frightened further. She had food with her, and drink, and she had clothing, too. But most of all, he thought, as he saw her get calmly into the flat-bottomed boat and take the oars in her own deft hands, most of all she had her own calm heart and her own unfearing soul.

"AT FIRST, she said," Maria the midwife told him later, "she had intended to drown herself. She took off her dress, there, where she had crawled up on the bank, and she threw herself in. But by the sure mercy of God, she did not sink, she must have floated, I think, for at least as long as it took her to discover that she could swim. I have known that to happen with children, sometimes the older boys will throw a young one in, and the scream and kick and before they quite know it: there

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they are, swimming." This newfound way of motion, perhaps even more than the shock of the water, brought her to another way of thinking. And the young woman did not think again of dying. What had hindered her upon the land was no hindrance in the water. She was formed after the manner of a seal, and in that manner she found her way with ever-increasing confidence upon the river. She ate the mussels and left the shells, had it been only coincidence that the secluded cove was named Lurley's Bend? She had not known it. And there were berries, windfallen fruit, and then, for a while, at least, the milk which the River Tartar lad had so innocently and so honestly left "for pay for shell."

But someone had to be told, of course. And Eszterhazy told the natural person to tell.

"Helena?" said Prince Roldrando Von Vlox. "Helena— Oh, God. I do remember now. I wondered what had happened. For a while. And then I forgot. Helena. . . ."

He took the rest of it very well indeed. "After all," he said, "it is in the blood. She is descended from King Baldwin and his undine wife on the one line, and on the other we are out of the body of Charlemagne himself, the great-grandson of the Webfooted Queen. Yes, yes," he said—almost to himself, almost, one might have thought, almost proudly, "the blood will tell. . . ." After a while he agreed that the younger Maria should go back to Bella and be examined by the Medical Faculty. "If she wishes to try what they can do, she is free to do so. And if not, not. She will lack for nothing which I can provide, of course."

The story which soon spread all around the fens and farmlands was that the Lord Prince's friend had caught the lurley-girl and had taken her up to Bella to show her to the Emperor, whom God preserve for many years. . . For a moment, as the news spread, each one who heard it reflected what a fine thing it was to be the tenant of a prince whose friend could capture a lurley and take her up to the capital city and show her to the Emperor.

And then, without exception, after a moment of such reflection, the same thought would occur to each and every of them. "Oh, Jesus, Mary and Joseph!" they cried. *"The buckwheat!"*

FORTUNATELY, the days were long, the weather stayed clear, they toiled like serfs. . . . but they saved the crop.

—AVRAM DAVIDSON

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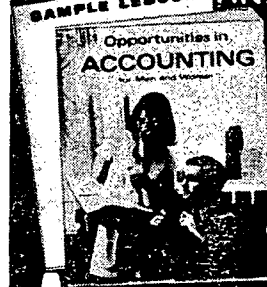

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THE SCROLL OF MORLOC

CLARK ASHTON SMITH & LIN CARTER

When Clark Ashton Smith died in 1957 he left behind the notes and outlines of many unwritten stories. Some were detailed plots, complete with character names and titles, running to four or five hundred words; others were one-sentence story-germs. Additionally, there were lists of titles with no story-ideas attached, lists of story-ideas sans titles, and long lists of made-up names Smith did not live to use. With the permission of his estate, Lin Carter has been turning some of these ideas and fragments into finished stories in a close, careful pastiche of his style, using as many genuine Smithian names and titles as possible. Two of these new stories appeared in the recently-revived and yet more recently folded Weird Tales; *the story which follows had been accepted for the fifth revived issue of that magazine, but it lasted only four issues. Carter notes that "The Scroll of Morloc" takes place in the imaginary prehistoric kingdom of Hyperborea, site of many of Smith's finest yarns, such as "The Coming of the White Worm." Like that story (itself Chapter Nine), this one is also a chapter (Chapter Three) of the* Book of Eibon, *Smith's legendary tome of prehistoric sorcery and myth, created in response to Lovecraft's* Necronomicon. . .

Illustrated by MICHAEL NALLY

THE SHAMAN Yhemog, dejected by the obdurate refusal of his fellow Voormis to elect him their high-priest, contemplated his imminent withdrawal from the trival burrows of his furry, primitive kind to sulk in proud and lonely solitude among the icy crags of the north, whose bourns were unvisited by his timorous, earth-dwelling brethren.

Seven times had he offered himself in candidacy for the coveted headdress of black *oggawood*, crowned with fabulous *huusim*-plumes, and now for the seventh time had the elders unaccountably denied him what he considered his just guerdon, earned thriceover by his pious and reverent austerities. Seething with disappointment, the rejected shaman swore they should have no eighth occasion whereon to bypass the name of Yhemog in bestowing the uncouth hierarchial mitre upon another, and vowed they should erelong have reason to regret the ineptitude of their selection of an inferior devotee of

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the Voormish god over one of his unique and excessive devoutness.

During this period many of the clans of the subhuman Voormis had fled into warrens tunneled beneath the surface of a jungle-girt and mountainous penninsula of early Hyperborea which had yet to be named Mhu Thulan. Their shaggy and semi-bestial forebears had originally been raised in thralldom to a race of sentient Serpent-people whose primordial continent had been reft asunder by volcanic convulsions and which had submerged beneath the oceans an aeon or two earlier. Fleeing from the slave pens of their erstwhile masters, now happily believed almost extinct, the ancestors of the present Voormis had wrested all of this territory from certain degenerate, cannibalistic subhumans of repellent appearance and loathsome habits, whose few survivors had been driven northwards to dwell in furtive exile amid the wastes of bleak and glacier-encumbered Polarion.

Of late, their numbers inexplicably in decline, their warlike prowess unaccountably dwindling into timidity, and the surly and vengeful descendants of their ancient foes growing ever more ominously populous and restive in the north, many of the Voormish tribes had sought refuge in these underground dwellings for safety and protection. By now the furry creatures were accustomed to the comforting gloominess and the

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familiar, pervasive stench of their warrens, and seldom if ever did they venture into the upper world, which had grown strange and frightening to them in its giddy and disquieting spaciousness of sky, lit by the intolerable brilliance of zenithal and hostile suns.

In contemplating self-imposed exile from his kind, the disgruntled shaman was not unaware of the dangers he must surmount. This particular region of the peninsula would someday be known as Phenquor, the northernmost province of Mhu Thulan. During this period of the early Cenozoic the first true humans were only just beginning to seep into Hyperborea from southerly regions of tropical jungles whose climate had grown too fervent for them to comfortably endure, and all of Phenquor was a savage and primal wilderness, uninhabited save for the caver-dwelling Voormis. Not without peril, therefore, would the shaman Yhemog traverse the prehistoric jungles and reeking fens of the young continent, for such were the haunts of the ravening catoblepas and the agate-breasted wyvern, to cite only the least formidable of the denizens of the prime.

But Yhemog had mastered the rudiments of the antehuman thaumaturgies and had gained some proficiency in the arts of shamanry and conjuration. By these means he thought himself quite likely to elude the more ferocious of the carnivora, thus achieving the relative safety of the Phenquorian mountains hopefully unscathed.

By dwelling subterraneously, it should perhaps be noted here, the Voormis were but imitating the grotesque divinity they worshipped with rites we might deem excessively sanguinary and revolting. As it was an article of the Voormish faith that this deity, whom they knew as Tsathoggua, made his abode in lightless caverns situated far beneath the earth, their adoption of a troglodytic mode of existence was to some extent primarily symbolic. The eponymous ancestor of their race, Voorm the arch-ancient, had quite early in their history promulgated a doctrine which asserted that their assumption of a wholly subterranean habitat would place them in a special relationship of mystical propinquity with their god, who himself preferred to wallow in the gulf of N'kai beneath a mountain to the south considered sacred by the Voormis. This dogma the venerable Voorm had pronounced shortly before himself retiring into chasms adjacent to the aforesaid N'kai in order to spend his declining aeons in proximity to the object of his worship.

The tribal elders unanimously revered the opinions of this patriarch as infallible, especially in matters of a purely theological nature, for it was commonly believed that their supreme pontiff

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and common ancestor had been fathered by none other than Tsathoggua himself during a transient liason with a minor feminine divinity who rejoiced in the name of Shathak. With this ultimate patriarchal teaching the tribal elders now, somewhat belatedly, concurred; to obey the last precept of their spiritual leader was, after all, a reasonable precaution when you considered the profound and disheartening desuetude into which the fortunes, of the race had so recently, and so abruptly, declined.

In reaching his eventual decision to henceforward shun the dank and foetid burrows of his tribe in favor of a radical change of residence to the giddy and vertiginous peaks which arose along the northerly borders of Phenquor, overlooking the frigid wastes of drear Polarion, the shaman Yhemog discovered himself ineluctably sliding into dangerous heresy. Unable to reconcile his private inclinations with the several pontifical revelations handed down by the eponymous patriarch of his race, he was soon implicitly questioning the actual validity of the teachings, a tendency which results in his eventual denial of their infallibility. Now rejecting as essentially worthless the very patriarchal dogmas he had earlier reverenced as sacrosanct, he lapsed from the most odious condition of heresy into the lamentable and blasphemous nadir of atheism.

Thus disappointment soured into bitter resentment and resentment festered into vicious envy and envy itself, like a venomous canker, gnawed at the roots of his faith, until the last pitiful shreds of his former beliefs had utterly been eaten away. And naught now was left in the heart of Yhemog save for a hollow emptiness, which became filled only with the bile of self-devouring rancor and a fierce, derisive contempt for everything he had once held precious and holy. This contempt cried out for expression, for a savage gesture of ultimate affront calculated to plunge his elder brethren into horrified consternation and dismay. Yhemog hungered to brandish his newfound atheism like a stinking rag beneath the pious snouts of the tribal fathers.

At length he determined upon a course of action nicely suited to his ends. He schemed to steal into the deepest and holiest shrine of Tsathoggua and to purloin therefrom an antique scroll which contained certain rituals and liturgies held in the ulmost degree of religious abhorrence by the members of his faith. The document was among the spoils of war carried off by his victorious forefathers from the abominable race which had formerly dominated these regions at the time of the advent of the Voormish savages into Mhu Thulan. The papyrus reputedly preserved the darkest secrets of the occult wisdom of the detested Gnophkehs,

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which name denoted the repulsively hirsute cannibals whom Yhemog's ancestors had driven into exile in the arctic barrens. This scroll contained, in fact, the most arcane and potent ceremonials whereby the Gnophkehs had worshipped their atrocious divinity, who was no less than an avatar of the cosmic obscenity Rhan-Tegoth, and was attributed to Morloc himself, the Grand Shaman.

Now the Voormis had, from their remotest origins, considered themselves the chosen minions of Tsathoggua, the sole deity whose worship they celebrated. And Tsathoggua was an earth elemental ranged in perpetual and unrelenting enmity against Rhan-Tegoth and all his kind, who were commonly accounted elementals of the air and were objects of contempt to those of the Old Ones, like Tsathoggua, who abominated the airy emptinesses above the world and by preference wallowed in darksome and subterranean lairs. A similar degree of mutual and irreconcilable animosity existed between those races which were the servants of Tsathoggua, among whom the Voormis were prominent, and those who served the avatars of cosmical and uncleanly Rhan-Tegoth, such as those noxious protoanthropophagi, the Gnophkehs. The loss of the Scroll of Morloc would, therefore, hurl the Voormis into the very nadir of confusion, and contemplation of the horror wherewith they would view the loss caused Yhemog to tremble with vile and delicious anticipation.

The Scroll had for millenia reposed in a tabernacle of mammoth-ivory situated beneath the very feet of the idol of Tsathoggua in the holy-of-holies, its lowly position symbolic of the Voormis risen triumphant over their subjugated and thoroughly inferior enemies. In order for the Scroll of Morloc to be thieved away by Yhemog, ere he quit forever the noisome and squalid burrows wherein he had passed the tedious and unrewarding centuries of his youth, he must, of necessity, first enter the most sacred and solemn precincts of the innermost shrine itself.

For a shaman of his insignificance, but recently graduated from his noviatiate a century or two before, to trespass upon the indescribable sanctity of the most forbidden and inviolable sanctuary was a transgression of the utmost severity. By his very presence he would profane and contaminate the sacerdotal chamber, and this horrendous act of desecration he must perforce do under the cold, unwavering scrutiny of dread, omnipotent Tsathoggua himself,—for therein had stood inshrined for innumerable ages the most ancient and immemorial eidolon of the god, an object of devout and universal veneration.

The very thought of thus violating the sacred adyts of the shrine to perform a vile and despicable

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act of burglary in the awesome presence of the deity he had once worshipped with such excessive vigor was sobering, even disquieting. But fortunately for the inward serenity of Yhemog, the fervor with which he had embraced his new-found atheism enormously transcended the fervor of his former pious devotions. His iconoclasm had hardened his heart to such an adamantine rigor that he despised his own earlier temerities, and now disbelieved in all super-mundane or ultra-natural entities far more than he had ever believed in them before. The venerable eidolon was but a piece of worked stone and naught more, he thought contemptuously to himself, and the arch-rebel, Yhemog, fears no thing of stone!

Thus it befell that the traitorous and atheistical Yhemog slunk one night into the deeper and nethermost of the shrines sacred to Tsathoggua, having prudently charmed into premature slumber the scimitar-wielding eunuchs posted to guard the inviolability of the sanctuary. By their obese, stertorously-breathing forms, sprawled recumbent on the pave before the spangled curtain which concealed the innermost adytum from the chance profanation of impious eyes, he crept on furtive, three-toed, naked feet. Beyond the glittering tissue was discovered a chamber singularly bare of ornamentation, in dramatic contrast to the ostentation of the outer precincts. It contained naught but the idol itself, throned at the farther end, which presented the repellent likeness of an obscenely corpulent, toadlike entity. Familiar as he was with the crude images roughly hacked from porous lava by the clumsy paws of his people, the shaman was unprepared for the astonishing skill whereby the nameless sculptor had wrought the eidolon from obdurate and frangible obsidian. He marvelled at the consummate craft whereby the chisel of the forgotten artisan had clothed the bloated, squatting form of the god with a suggestion of sleek furriness and had blent together in its features the salient characteristics of toad, bat and sloth, in a dubious amalgam subtly disturbing and distinctly unpleasing. The ponderous divinity was depicted with half-closed, sleepy eyes which seemed almost to glitter with cold, lazy malice, and it had a grinning and lipless gash of mouth which Yhemog fancied was distended in a smile redolent of cruel and gloating mockery.

His new contempt for all such supernatural entities dimmed, fading, somewhat, in its originally febrile intensity before a rising trepidation. For a moment he hesitated, half-fearing the hideous and yet exquisitely lifelike eidolon might stir suddenly to dread wakefulness upon the next instant, and reveal itself to be a living thing. But the moment passed without any such an untoward vivification, and his derision and de-

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nial of the transmundane rose within him, trebled in its blind conviction. Now was the moment of ultimate profanation upon him; now he would metaphorically renounced his former devotions by abstracting from beneath the very feet of the supernally sacred image its chiefest treasure, the papyrus wherein were preserved the blackest of the arcane secrets of the elder Gnophkehs. Summoning the inner fortitude his atheistical doctrines afforded, thrusting aside the last lingering remnants of the superstitious awe he had once entertained towards the divinity the idol represented, Yhemog knelt and hastily pried open the ivory casket and drew therefrom the primordial scroll.

Whereafter there occurred absolutely nothing in the way of preternatural phenomena or transmundane acts of vengeance. The black and glistening statue remained immobile; it neither blinked nor stirred nor smote him with the levin-bolt of the precipitous attack of leprosy he had almost expected. The relief which upsurged within his furry breast was intoxicating; almost he swooned in a delirium of exultant joy. But in the next moment dire melancholy drowned his heady mood; for he realized now for the first time the fullest extent of the vicious hoax the praeceptors of his cult had perpetrated upon him. To so delude an innocent young Voormis-cub, so that the noblest aspiration it might conceivably dream to attain was the *ogga*-wood mitre of the hierophant, was an action of such perverted and despicable odiom as to excite within him a lust to desecrate, with a blasphemy transcending all his prior conceptions of blasphemy, this sacred place.

Ere spurning forever the moist and gloomy tunnels to seek a new and solitary life amongst the steaming quagmires and cycadic jungles of the upper earth he would commit a desecration so irremediable as to defile, pollute and befoul for all aeons to come this innermost citadel of a false and cruelly-perpetuated religion. And in his very clutches he held at that moment the perfect instrument of triumphant and absolute revenge. For how better to desanctify the temple of Tsathoggua, than to recite before his most venerable eidolon, and within his most sacred and forbidden shrine, the abominable rituals formerly employed by the hated enemies of his minions in the celebration of their obscene and atrocious divinity, his rival?

With paws that shook with the intensity of his loathing and wrath, Yhemog unfolded the antique papyrus and, straining his weak, small eyes, sought to peruse the writings it contained. The hieroglyphics were indited according to an antiquated system, but at length his scrutiny enabled him to deduce their meaning. The dark lore of the Gnophkehs was generally cen-

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tered upon the placation and appeasement of their grisly and repugnant divinity, but erelong the shaman found a ritual of invocational worship which he judged would be exceptionally insulting to the false Tsathoggua and his self-deluding servants. It commenced with the uncouth and discordant phrase *Wza-y'ei! Wza-y'ei! Y'kaa haa bho-ii,* and terminated eventually in a series of mindless ululations for the enunciation of which the vocal apparatus of the Voormis was inadequately designed. As he commenced reading the liturgical formula aloud, however, he discovered that the farther he progressed therein the more easily his pronunciation became. He also was surprised to find, as he grew near the terminus of the ritual, that the vocables he had earlier considered jarring and awkward became curiously, even disquietingly, musical and pleasant to his ears.

Those ears, he suddenly noticed, had unaccountably grown larger and now were not unlike the huge, flapping organs of the ill-formed and ridiculously-misshapen Gnophkehs. His eyes as well has undergone a singular transformation, and now bulged protuberantly in a manner which resembled that of the revolting inhabitants of the polar regions. Having completed the final interminable ululation he let fall the scroll of Morloc and examined himself in growing consternation. Gone was his sleek and comely pelt, and in its place he was now covered with a repulsive growth of coarse and matted hairs. His snout, moreover, had in the most unseemly and impertinent manner undertaken an extension of itself beyond the limits considered handsome by Voormish standards, and was now a naked, proboscidian growth of distinctly and unmistakably Gnophkehian proportions. He cried out, then, in an extremity of unbelieving horror, for he realized with a cold and awful panic that *to worship as a Gnophkeh* must, under certain circumstances, be defined in terms absolutely literal. And when his hideous lamentations succeeded in rousing from their charmed drowsiness the gross and elephantine eunuchs beyond the sequined veil, and they came lumbering in haste to discover a detested and burglarious Gnophkeh squirming on its obscene and hairy belly, gobbling guttural and incomprehensible prayers before the smiling, the enigmatic, and the lazily malicious eyes of Tsathoggua, they dispatched the malodorous intruder with great thoroughness and righteous indignation, and in a certain manner most acceptable to the god, but one so lingering and anatomically ingenious that the more squeamish of my readers should be grateful that I restrain my pen from its description.

—Clark Ashton Smith
& Lin Carter

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Dennis More is an Australian who tells us that his story "takes place in southern Britain, in January of the year 512 AD. The characters are all my inventions but the king. He's mentioned in the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle *(which spells his name Aesc and says he was Hengist's son) and in Nennius, who spells his name as I have it here but makes him Hengist's grandson. . ."*

FUGITIVES IN WINTER

DENNIS MORE

Illustrated by LAURENCE KAMP

I GUESTED THE DAYS of Yule that year with King Oisc of Kent, Hengist's son. I knew him from a voyage he'd made to Erin when I was a brat. His hair had turned white since then, but the old wolf had kept all his fangs. They still talk of the slaughter he did in his last battle. It was great, and you may take my word for it, for I was there; but that's a tale for another time. Gore enough in this to content most of you.

The first of it ran when Tosti opened his mouth to me.

Tosti was one of the king's companions. His place in the hall was fourth or fifth after the king. He was inches taller than me, and that made him huge indeed. He'd pale eyes and a hideously scarred face, the work of a desperate foe armed with a sword snapped half a foot from the hilt, as they grappled in the mud of a ford running bloody with war. Tosti had broken the man's arm and then torn out his throat with his teeth, so the story went. I made a song about it.

(I'd already chanted the deeds of Oisc and his father in glorious detail.)

It's grateful Tosti should have been, or at least appreciative, but he was neither. A bard is just not respected among the sea-wolves as among the Britons or at home. I'll concede that the poor excuses for bards they have do not deserve respect. But that's by the way. When the real thing visits their brawling duns they might show some decent awe. Instead this companion of the king's dared bait me, without spite, like a man kicking a dog because it's there. Me, Felimid of Erin!

'You, boy!' said he. 'Is that smooth face because you can't grow a beard like a man? Haven't your balls dropped yet? Or have you none? Are you a girl disguised, come here to find a real

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man for yourself? By Wotan, you needn't look further, if that's so!'

His comrades guffawed.

I had an answer for him. If he liked beards so much, I'd give him one to make all others insignificant, one he could show with pride. I took up the harp.

Her name is Golden Singer, and she is ancient as legend itself. Her frame is time-blackened oak polished by centuries of loving use to a soft subtle patina, a sheen. Her strings are fine gold. She was made for Cairbre the bard in the days of the Tuatha de Danann, and strong antique magic is in her. I invoked it now. With my hands and my voice I called on all the powers of generation there are.

The noises and scents of spring came into Oisc's hall. The dogs sniffed the air in bewilderment. The central pillar of the hall, a mighty tree still rooted in the earth but deprived of bark and branches for half a century, put forth green budding twigs. The rioting sea-wolves grew silent. Then I turned the forces I had wakened on Tosti as he sat glowering and mute.

'Chief wi' the tongue of a churl or child,
I chant a charm that your chaff has earned;
Choke on the beard of your cheeks and chin!

'Feel it grow fast as a fire in furze,
And free as the wind that fans the flame;
Fork and curl from your face to your feet!'

My victim looked baffled, as nearly as I could tell from his bearded and hideous face. Cairbre and Ogma! He had cause! Then, as something crawled hairily over his hands where one held a drinking horn and the other drummed irritable fingers on the table before him, he was moved to look down. His yell of astonishment drew every eye in the hall.

His beard had spread across his chest like a great flowing glacier and was now twisting, curling, writhing over the table, growing at a rate of feet a minute. He stared at it, stupefied. He wasn't alone. Slackly open mouths and huge round eyes they were wearing from the king's throne to the kitchen door. My ribs ached as though I'd run all day, with mirth held in. Oh, this was good!

'Fain let it lie on your limbs like lead,
And load you down as with links of chain,
Nor cease as long as my lilt shall last.'

The proliferating beard had the mass of several fleeces by now. It spilled from the far side of the table towards the floor. Tosti lifted it helplessly in his hands, glaring. Then came the first great chortle of laughter, from King Oisc himself, like the crash of thunder that heralds a storm to shake earth and sky. They roared, they stamped their feet, they pounded the ta-

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bles, they hammered each other's backs, they rolled on the floor, they turned black! A few burst their guts and died. Those who had stuffed themselves too full of rich things, I reckon.

But I laughed hardest of all. I stopped singing, I stopped harping, and I'd specified *as long as my lilt shall last*, so Tosti's beard stopped growing. He slashed it frantically short again with his dagger. That set the sea-wolves whooping once more.

I sauntered across to where Tosti sat. When I could speak and be heard, which meant waiting a while, I eyed the great mound of yellow hair and said, 'You have the makings of a fine soft mattress there. Are you not going to thank me?'

More laughter, more bellows and snortings and gasps. Tosti's hands worked and clenched as his awful face convulsed in temper. With no warning at all he sprang over the table and rushed at me, his blade leaping out. I ducked a slash that would have rolled my head on the rushes for the dogs to gnaw, and dodged around the trunk with its new green shoots. There were yells of 'Coward!' which I did not deign to listen to. I kept eluding Tosti while I unbuckled my own sword, then threw belt and scabbard away. That sort of encumbrance in a fight will finish you.

'Frightened, harper?' sneered Tosti. 'You should be! I'll teach you to work your puking magic on a man!'

A thunder of delighted anticipation rose from the benches. The sea-wolves consider it a dull feast that doesn't see at least one fight to the death. No entertainment like it.

Tosti and I circled each other. He held his Jutish broadsword in his left hand, having lost three fingers from his right in his first battle. Since then he'd taught himself to use his left, and become more than proficient, it was said. I was undismayed; I'm left-handed myself, though not because of any maiming. I was born that way. It felt almost comfortable to fight a man whose grip matched mine.

But not for long.

He came with a leap, hacking at my head. I caught the stroke a foot from my hilt. The force of it drove me to one knee. Cenn Cruaich, he was strong! I'd heard he cleft shields like loaves of bread and split men to the waist. Now I found it was true.

He cut at me three times before I could rise. I parried each stroke, though I dared not catch them full on my blade as I had the first. I deflected them instead. His blade skidded the length of mine with a harsh metal shriek each time. It left my hand numb.

Then my opening came. It wasn't much of one, but I was in no case to be picky. I thrust at his leg, felt my point dig into the fleshy part of his knee. That surprised him. I sprang to my feet

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and a full yard back in the second's respite I had. His bright edge flashed so close past my eyes I felt the wind of it. There is no more ugly and intimate sensation in the world.

But I'd given Tosti something to think about. His own patterned sword had a round tip. In his philosophy, a sword was for slashing and hacking. The only part of it that mattered was the edge. But my own Kincaid, forged in old times by Goibniu the smith, a treasure as immemorial as Golden Singer herself, was pointed like a spear. His eyes narrowed as he realised it.

'That sword is too good for you,' he said. 'When I kill you it will be mine.'

I grinned at him. Red was staining his cross-thonged breeches where I had touched him. 'You won't kill me, Jute.' He feinted at my side, then cut at my head and missed. I was quicker on my feet than he. 'You've already come as close as you ever will.'

He snarled, and tried to make a liar of me with a sweeping slash that whistled through half a circle at the height of my waist. I jumped above that devastating arc, or Felimid of Erin would have died in separate halves. Tosti was briefly off balance, and wide open. I struck ere my feet touched the floor.

Kincaid's razor edge bit through his collar-bone and gashed his shoulder deep. He backed away swearing, and changed hands. With only a thumb and one finger to grip the hilt it was a useless delaying of the end. I followed him and struck the weapon from his clutch. Then I shortened my hold on Kincaid, stepped close to Tosti and hit him in the temple wi' the silver pommel, big as a girl's clenched fist. He toppled bleeding on the rushes.

A roar of acclaim that I had altogether earned and deserved burst from a hundred bearded mouths. Sea-wolves clapped me on the back. An aurochs horn brimming with ale was thrust into my hand. I took a long thirsty pull at it and gave it back. Then I cleaned Kincaid, sheathed him and buckled him on. Tosti was carried out to convalesce. King Oisc himself commended my showing, drank my health and thanked me for not killing his hearth companion and fiercest fighting man. The feast went on.

II

By midnight the hall was a shambles. A score of men had drunk themselves senseless and snored on bench or floor. Some capered in the skins of wolf, bear, hog and even horse, and made appropriate noises. It's a sacred rite in the lands they come from, across the Narrow Sea, but a few generations in Britain have made them less pious. It's just a game to them now. Some tested their strength by going down on hands and knees while other men strad-

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dled their necks, then trying to stand up. Ha! You have to be drunk to do that! Some rushed together like fighting bucks til their heads met ringingly and ran with blood. Some rogered their girls, and that reminded me of mine. I decided it was time for bed.

Bed was a pile of hay in the loft of a barn. One of the kitchen girls shared it with me. She was British as her name, Regan. She had been captured in a raid on some steading and later given to the king in settlement of a debt. She had been married, but her husband had been killed in the raid, and she had borne a son, but he'd died in his first year. And there was spirit in her yet, and laughter, though she showed it seldom. She deserved better of life than she'd had.

When I came to the loft she was drowsing in the nest of furs and blankets I'd made. The ladder's creaking and the soft rustle of the hay wakened her. The change in her breathing told me that before she spoke.

'Felimid?'

'It had better be,' I said, undressing. 'I'll beat you if you expected someone else.'

She giggled, eyes a faint shine in the dark. There were interesting small stirrings as she arranged the bed and herself to receive me. She embraced me with arms and legs in whole-hearted gladness, complete welcome. When she slept again her head lay on my breast, her fingers were twined in the hair of it and her sweet loins straddled my thigh. I lay there feeling intolerably smug. I have good memories of that loft.

The next word she spoke was at dawn; the same word. 'Felimid.'

I was asleep, but I sleep lightly. It's the price of living as your own man in this world, never to take your complete ease. Och, there was nothing in particular to fear as guest of a king of the sea-wolves, but I saw nothing in particular to trust. I woke, listened, heard no breathing but hers and mine, sensed no presence in the loft beyond our bed, relaxed. I ran a hand down the curve of her back to her pretty rear. Her hips worked reminiscently.

'Ah, Felimid.'

'Sure. that's my name.'

'What you did to Tosti last night . . . I didn't know you were a magician.'

'I'm not! But there's magic in this harp of mine, and in words if you know the use of them; and maybe some in me. The men of my line do inherit the gift. I'm descended direct from Cairbre, the bard of the Tuatha de Danann. My people have been harpers in Erin since the world was new.'

'I remember you're a heathen when you talk like that. I forget it most of the time.'

'Then forget it again, acushla. It's not a thing I would change.'

'It troubles me, though. If you were Christian I could ask you something. That you're heathen

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makes you one of a kind with the king.'

'I'm one of a kind, and there it ends! But I can think of worse insults than to be compared with Oisc. It's a great hero he is.'

'Yes, but I don't want a hero; just a man,' she said.

'Well, I'm that, too. But what is it you're gathering all your courage to say? What is it you want to ask me?'

She gabbled it desperately, in a rush. 'Felimid, take me away from here, I'm begging you, please! I hate it here! I hate these heathen who grab me and use me whenever they feel like it—who sacked my home and murdered my people—and—I don't mean you, but—'

'Whoa!' I said, hugging her, rocking her back and forth for comfort. 'You want me to steal you from Oisc, is that it? You want to run away with me?'

'Mother of God, no!' She looked at me with horror. 'We'd be brought back. He'd whip me, but he'd hang you. Or maybe he wouldn't. After the way you beat Tosti, he'd hold you worthy of the death of the red eagle.'

'Well, that's an honour I've no ambition for.'

'But you could ask him for me,' she went on. 'He might give me to you.'

'Ha! More likely he'd give me a couple of broken ribs, the close-fisted old wolf! An Erse king couldn't refuse a bard, nor a British king neither, but Oisc is a Jute. No respect in him for musicians. And say, in a drunken moment, he did part with you. Where would you go?'

'I suppose—with you.'

'For how long? More often I sleep in a tree than a bed. I'm in scrapes and brawls from year's beginning to year's end. And when my feet itch, there's not a woman or man who can keep up with me. Or are you thinking to make me a Christian? Have me settle down?' I shuddered. 'Na, thank you.'

And there it was. Before her home was burned, Regan had never gone more than ten miles from the spot where she was born. Most people never do. There was nothing to which she could return. She was a kitchen girl in Oisc's dun, and wherever she went she would still have to be a kitchen girl; or a peasant's wife, or a whore. Both those things were worse than what she had here.

'Well, then, take me to some Christian town or village!' she said. 'Anywhere! It doesn't matter!'

'Why?' I demanded. 'Are Christians all that much kinder than sea-wolves? Not that I've noticed.'

'I'm losing my soul in this place!' she wailed. 'I haven't been to church in half a year. There was a little wooden crucifix I've had since I was three, but one of the scullions threw it in a privy. I can't even pray without being kicked. I can't learn this language:

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it's more like the noise of bears than any human talk! And there's that horrible man, King Oisc's tame wizard. I can smell the evil of him ten yards away. He frightens me sick.' She trembled. 'Listen,' she said then, dully. 'If you don't help me, I'll kill myself and be damned. For if you don't help me, it's not likely that I'll ever meet another who can or will. Is that what you want?'

'Not particularly,' I mocked her. 'All right, I'll ask him! And if he says me nay after the entertainment I've given him, he's a skinflint not fit to rule. And I'll take you just the same. Na, na, listen to me, he won't catch us! I can harp a strain to bring deep sleep on all who hear it, and we can be out of Kent by the time they wake. So don't fret. I'll have you back among Christians in a week. I know some in Calleva, good people, the best. I'll take you there if you've nowhere else to go.'

The sunrise in her face was better than the one on the eastern horizon, and I say it from no lack of respect for my Lord the Sun. I was generous and noble and fine, she said, and the best man she'd ever met, and she babbled on like that for minutes til even I grew uncomfortable, and shut her up the most tactful way there is. Not that I'm denying a word of it.

I watched her comb the tangles and bits of hay from her midnight hair, and braid it. When some girls lift their arms that way their tits flatten to vanishing. When Regan did it they stayed as round and high as ever. Wide solid shoulders and hips were hers, with a narrow nimble waist between, and short but very shapely limbs. Her hands were roughened and red as a kitchen girl's always are. She had the biggest, bluest eyes I've ever seen. I wasn't at all sure that Oisc would willingly part with her, though at home the king who denied such a request would be pelted with peat by his own men. But he'd part with her none the less.

She dressed quickly, kissed me slowly and was gone. She had her work to do, and punishment to face if she shirked it. For now she was still a bondwoman.

On her way to the kitchen she passed a tiny log hut. Four big stones raised it a yard off the ground, and in front of it squatted a flat-faced yellow man in feathers and reindeer skins, a drum on his lap. He wasn't much bigger than Regan, who crossed herself at the sight of him. This was Kisumola, the man she had mentioned, the king's tame wizard.

Entranced, he sat beating his drum in unearthly rhythms with a baton of reindeer horn. He could summon demons or the spirits of the dead wi' that drum, and banish them. He could divine the future. The surface of the throbbing, muttering thing was covered with pictures—men, animals, birds, fish—and symbols of rain, wind, snow, tide, even my Lord

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the Sun. A carved wooden ring called an *arpa* skittered and danced over the figures as the drum was beaten. In the pattern of its movements, Kisumola saw the pattern of happenings to come.

He must ha' found it interesting or mighty obscure, for he kept up his drumming all day. From dawn til dusk he squatted there in a strict fast. Not a drop did he drink, not a bite did he eat, not a word did he say. I'm telling you, there were short tempers over it, especially among the men whose heads rang like anvils as it was, from boozing too hard. And at the height of the Yule celebrations these were most of the dun.

I never have hangovers, so it didn't affect me.

That's what I thought.

The feasting had barely started that night, by sea-wolves' standards, when Kisumola came in. I hadn't mentioned Regan to the king yet. I bided my time at the foot of his table. I'd ask later, when the flush of Yule cheer was on him, and my songs had worked their magic, and if he denied me then, I'd harp him another kind of magic. By Cairbre and Ogma! I'd be pleased if it came to that, in a way. A much better story it would make.

Then entered Kisumola, leaping and prancing in rage. The glare of his eyes was ghastly; he foamed at the mouth. The plumage sewn to the back and along the sleeves of his deerskin jacket seemed to ruffle and rise like that of a furious bird. His drum was tucked under his arm. One last awful epileptic leap he made. Then he stood grotesquely still before Oisc.

'Master!' he almost whispered. 'My spirits have spoken to me! There is treachery in your hall, and a knife aimed at your back! There is one who eats of your bounty and means you harm! Give me leave to find him!'

Oisc looked startled, but gave his permission. The wizard prowled among the tables. Men made protective signs against him as Regan had done. He beat the drum with his open hand, an ugly, uneasy pattering that set my teeth on edge. He went up and down the hall. He came back again to the king's table.

Then he flung up a skinny arm and pointed directly at me!

'There!' he shrilled. 'That one! He's a spy for the British kings, a spy! My spirits have told me!'

I was too stupefied to deny it at once. The king looked at me with eyes like blue ice. 'What do you say to that, Felimid?'

I told him at considerable length what I said to that. Lies and calumny and untruth and false witness it was from start to finish. I was a man of honour and my coming to Kent had no ulterior motives at all. The wizard had misinterpreted the message of his spirits, an easy thing to do because such beings can state nothing directly or simply. Or else he lied.

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Kisumola screeched vituperation and denials.

'Shut up,' Oisc told him. Then, to me, 'Why should he lie?'

'Och, wizards are more jealous than concubines. I reckon my joke on Tosti has him thinking that one wizard in this dun is enough.'

'Thin, mighty thin,' declared Oisc. 'It's not your intention to stay past the end of winter, and Kisumola knows that. Listen, you dog of the tundra! I saved your miserable life in the north, and I've kept you, fed you, protected you since. I'll have you buried to the neck in sea sand to wait for the tide if you're telling me lies.'

'Master, have I lied or been mistaken before? Ever?'

'No,' admitted Oisc. He looked at me hard. 'He's just such a one as the British kings might send, for a fact.' The mistrust in his grim stare grew. Jutish wits are not quick, but their suspicion is, and their anger. 'Seize him!'

Men were standing beside and behind me, waiting for such an order, but they were too slow in carrying it out. I had been expecting it also. I kicked one of them in the balls, and dislocated another's jaw with my elbow as he laid hands on me. I ran. A warrior with a spear barred my way, thrusting: I slashed the shaft in two, sprang past him and put my back against the hall's big central pillar. Now should we see!

The king bellowed, 'Take him alive!'

'Alive, is it?' I laughed. 'Cairbre and Ogma! High is the price you will pay for that! I'm determined, look you, *not* to be taken alive! I know what your Jutish amusements are! The first three men who come near me will die, if you command them not to slay. Or why don't you come, Hengist's son?'

'I will!' he said. 'None of you lads attack him! Just form two lines with a narrow lane between, so that he can't move from where he is without showing his back to someone. Then leave him to me.'

I was puzzled. Was Oisc himself meaning to fight me? He held no weapon. Then he showed why he was a king. Ripping a great shaggy bearskin from the wall, he ran forward, and whirling the skin with all his gigantic strength, he threw it. I couldn't avoid it, because of the men hemming me in. I was covered, enwrapped, whelmed in smothering fur. It was weighty and vast as the sea.

They gave me no chance to struggle free. They pinned me with my face in the rushes, legs held down, an unrelenting foot in the small of my back. Disarmed, I was dragged upright, to look at Oisc's grimly laughing face.

'Bring him to the pit,' he commanded.

My hands were tied behind me. With kicks and cuffs and shoves I was taken to a rough round chamber at the far end of the hall. Rising tiers of benches encircled the pit in the middle. Out of it rose a clamour of growls and

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snarls as we entered. I knew then what the king planned for me. My belly shrank to a lumpy cold clot of fear. I fought my captors madly and to no purpose.

"Give him a look,' said Oisc. 'No more just yet.'

Torches blazed around the pit's rim in the hands of grinning men. Below, six wolves tried frenziedly to reach us. Gaunt hairy bodies, drooling red tongues, glinting eager fangs, eyes like firelit rubies, glaring. I bit down on my lip til the blood ran.

'Fine beasts, are they not?' demanded Oisc. 'I feed them just enough to keep them from eating each other. But I won't have them tear you now. No, by Wotan, I'll save you for later! Bind his legs and hang him by the feet from that beam! He can watch the wolves for a few hours and think of what's to come!'

This they did. One end of a long rope was tied securely about my ankles, the other tossed over a beam that ran directly above the wolf pit. They heaved me into position and knotted the free end to an iron ring in the wall. I dangled head down and looked on jeering, upturned faces. The ugliest of all, the face of a man with his left arm in a sling, wore a wide grin of satisfaction, as at work well done. I knew then why Kisumola had lied about me. Tosti had paid him or forced him to do it. I cursed them wi' the most hideous dooms I could think of.

'I'll see that your master learns what happened to you,' mocked Oisc. 'Who is he, harper? Marius? Nicodemus? Cador? Agloval? The Warlord himself? Agh, don't answer, then. It doesn't matter now. Come, companions, the feast is getting cold.'

For a while dozens came in to goggle and laugh. But a man hanging like a side of beef is not rewarding to stare at for long, and soon enough I was alone. The noise of celebration came clearly through the hide curtains that masked the entrance to the wolves' pit chamber. In a few hours the king would come back to round off his night's revels by watching me torn limb from limb. Moments of agony worse than fire, and then no more songs forever. I had to escape!

Nor would I concede that it couldn't be done. If I had, I'd have gone stark mad. The wolves stared longingly up at me. They knew what to expect. Cold sweat ran down my face into my hair. I knew what to expect, too.

So. There was nothing I could do with my hands behind me. Could I get them in front of me?

I was supple enough, and I could try. With an effort that set my leg muscles shrieking I touched my arse to my heels. Try it some day while you swing upside down from a rope. But it was nothing to what I had still to perform. Grunting and arching my back like a bow, I strove to force my bound hands past my feet. It's long feet I have, too. My face

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purpled from a rush of blood to the head. I felt as though my skull would burst. The tendons behind my knees were like hot wires about to snap. Ha! My bound hands cleared my toes! I slid them up the rope, thrusting down with my legs, and stood right way up in my bonds. My hands were before my face!

I worried the knot with my teeth till it loosened and gave. With my hands free, I climbed the rope to the beam. There I untied my feet. Fling me to the wolves, would they? But I was cleverer than all of them!

I crawled along the beam to perch above the curtained entrance while I thought on what to do next. If anyone came in he would not see me at once, and I would drop on his back if he was alone. And strangle him.

The sword Kincaid and the harp Golden Singer! I must get them back! They are two of the three treasures of the Tuatha de Danann that are left. As their bearer, I couldn't abandon them while I lived. I was considering schemes to find them when the hangings were brushed aside.

A lone warrior came in, lurching. Most probably he wanted to piss and did not care to face the cold. He should have done. The impact of me knocked him to his knees. I caught his chin in one hand, the back of his head with the other, set a knee in the small of his back and wrenched hard. There was the sound of a green branch breaking, and a sort of snuffling grunt from the man's throat. No more than that. I shivered as I let him fall. The ease with which he had died reminded me of the ease with which I could die. It's always the same. When you kill, you only prove how mortal you yourself are. But there's no way to live in this world without killing once in a while.

I stripped the dead man of dagger and sword. He wore a bearskin belt nearly two feet wide, held up by straps over his shoulders, and good stout boots of walrus hide lined and trimmed with fur. I took those too. Dead men's boots are supposed to be bad luck, but so are frostbitten toes. Then I heaved the corpse into the pit.

The wolves snarled and fought.

I cut the rope that had been around my feet and frayed it to look like a break. The part knotted to the iron ring I left where it was. The rest I dropped into the pit. I hoped they would think it had snapped under my weight, and that the warrior's remains were mine. The warrior himself might not be missed until the next day. I knew Jutish feasts by this time.

Now I must get out of here. A door lay opposite the entrance from the hall. I tried it, but it was barred on the outside. Then I heard the sound of the bar being lifted! I pressed myself against the wall.

The door opened wide enough

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to let in one person in a hooded cloak. She saw the dangling rope and ran to the edge of the pit. When she saw the feasting wolves she fell to her knees.

'Felimid—ah, Felimid!' she moaned. 'God forgive me!'

Regan!

I passed an arm round her waist, clapped a hand over her mouth. I'll admit I was nine sorts of fool to let her know I was there. I should have slipped out the door while her back was turned. It's not likely she would have seen me, but I didn't think of it. She jerked spastically at my touch.

'It's all right,' I said in her ear. 'It's not me down there. Now don't faint or have hysterics! This is not the time! Do you understand me?'

I had to repeat the question and shake her before she nodded. I freed her mouth.

'Felimid,' she whispered. 'Are you alive?'

'Na thanks to Tosti and Kisumola! I'll have 'em both one day! But what are you doing here?'

'Tosti and Kisumola? I thought this was because of me! I came to free you. Look! I've brought your harp and sword.'

She had! Cairbre and Ogma! I'd never ha' thought she had it in her! How she got them I don't know to this day. Oisc wouldn't have left such treasures lying carelessly around. I snatched them eagerly. She had also brought a heavy cloak, some bread, cheese and a flask of mead. She was magnificent, and I told her so.

'It's magnificent you are! Listen, my wren, I'm for the Forest of Andred. Come with me.'

Joy flashed from those blue blue eyes. But then she wept. 'I'd hamper your escape. It's miles over the downs. And—the Forest of Andred? It's full of devils and monsters and wild men! I've been told—'

'I don't care what you've been told!' I kissed her. 'You'd hamper me more by staying, for I won't go without you, and to that I take oath. As for the forest, you won't come to harm there while I'm with you. Now stop wasting time.'

Tossing the cloak around my shoulders, I took her hand and left that grisly chamber. Closed the door; barred it. The wind howled like the Banshee and cut like a knife and chilled like a midwinter sea. Twisted clouds came and went across the moon, but it wasn't snowing; then. The palisade was not guarded. The men whose duty it should have been were boozing as though eternity in the dry Christian hell was near, or flat on their backs in the hay. In minutes we were over the log wall and gone.

III

THE BARKING OF DOGS it was that awakened me. I tried to leap up and draw steel, but I couldn't, because Regan was asleep on top

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of me, four sheep had clustered suffocatingly tight around us; and we and they were buried in a drift. If you wonder how we came there, I can't blame you. I wondered myself on waking. Then it came back to me.

We'd fled the Isle of Thanet, where the king's dun was, and where aforetime a Roman customs post had been, both built on the Isle for the same reason. It's a focus for the trade of the North and Narrow Seas. And all the merchants I've met in all my life have said there is no real difference between a customs officer and a pirate.

I wander. We'd fled Thanet, the girl and I, in a small boat; stolen. I turned it adrift once we reached the mainland. Then we walked miles with an angry nor'easter at our backs to help us on. An hour or two after midnight, snow came with it, falling thick and fast. Regan was soon at the end of her strength, and I had to carry her. Then we stumbled on four lost sheep, huddled against a pile of boulders. We took shelter with 'em. The snow had buried us all, but the warmth and pressure of our bodies had hollowed a small hard-packed space for us, and our breath had made a little shaft for air. We'd kept each other from dying of cold. We hadn't been comfortable, but we were alive.

Now I heard the dogs. They were immediately above us. I was frightened half out of my wits, thinking of Oisc. I lifted my head from the woolly shoulder that had served me for a pillow. Na, na. That was not the deep fierce baying of the king's hunting hounds, the huge wolfhounds whose fathers he had fetched from Erin himself, twelve years gone. This was a light shrill yelping, excited and glad.

Regan was awake, now. She gave me room to work, all she could, and that was not much, but I dug up through the snow with my hands while the dogs dug down. In a couple of minutes my whitened head found the open air. Two feet of snow had fallen in the night, maybe, and the wind had piled it high against the rocks, but we weren't buried as deep as all that. A fathom at the most, I'd reckon.

Well. I rose like Lazarus from the tomb in the grey false dawn, stinking of sheep, and the dogs doubled their barking. Lean, lop-eared, rough-coated, bright-eyed mongrels they were, not big but clever. I kicked them away, but they darted around me still and wouldn't stint their noise. Ignoring 'em, I lifted Regan out of the drift. She pulled a face.

'Hoo!' she went. 'The cramps I have! And oh, but it's cold out here!'

It was. My teeth chattered and I felt my face turning blue. In the drift we'd at least been out of the wind that ulutated over the downs. And had a fleece of living wool to snuggle into. The snow

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had not melted and soaked us, except in a few small patches. But now . . . Cairbre and Ogma, now. . .

'Here, take back your cloak!' she said quickly, for I'd wrapped it around her above her own, some hours gone. I didn't take it. I was examining Golden Singer to be sure she had come to no harm. Nor had she. Her moulded leather case was strong, and waterproof as an egg.

The dogs went on barking. Regan suddenly clutched my arm and pointed down the slope. A man was coming, a bent gnarled man in a sheepskin coat and broad-brimmed hat, a long ash crook in one hand, a wooden shovel in the other. The dogs and the sheep must be his.

'Heh!' he said in surprise, noticing us. 'What's this?'

'Why, this is a woman,' I told him, 'named Regan. If you can't tell that, it must be a long time since last you saw one. Myself is a harper. My name is Felimid.'

'Harper!' His rheumy eyes lit with eagerness. 'Lost, are ye?'

'I wouldn't say that. I know where we are, and where I'm going; but if the king catches us, then we will be lost. We're fugitives, if I must be honest.'

'Fugitives! Heh! Well, I didn't think ye'd been hiding in the snow wi' four o' me sheep fer fun. I been looking fer the stupid things ever since the snow stopped, frightened the wolves 'ud find 'em first. The king, ye say?'

'Himself.'

'That's bad,' he declared solemnly. 'He's a hard man, the king is, from what I hear o' him. I know his tax-gatherers are! Only good thing he's ever done for me is hunt wolves on the downs. Well now, look, sir, I can't help ye. Don't dare. Not o' me own will. But then ye're much younger'n me, and carry a sword, so I couldn't refuse aught ye might wish to demand o' me, could I? Heh!' He grinned and smirked at his cleverness, showing a few brown fangs.

Another would have knocked him down. But I'm not another; I'm me. I fell in with his play-acting, cold or not. I set Kincaid's point against the apple of his throat, as nearly as I could find it through his tangled beard.

'Take us to your hut and feed us,' I said in tones of overdone menace, 'or I'll open your windpipe for you.' For good measure I winked; no use in subtlety here. The shepherd was delighted.

'O' course, o' course.'

'Where is your hut?' I asked him, shoving Kincaid back in his sheath.

'Two miles to the south, sir. Heh! But I've got to dig out these plaguey animals o' mine.'

I took the shovel and dug 'em out for him, swiftly. I reckoned there was time for that. We couldn't be more than ten miles from Thanet, but all the tracks we'd left in those ten miles were buried. Kisumola could find us

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with his magic, of course, but such divination takes time. I'd been hunted that way before, and I knew.

We dragged those unforgivably stupid woollies out of their white bed, and the dogs got them moving with shrill barks and occasional small nips of their hind legs. And kept them moving, too. We reached the shepherd's hut as my Lord the Sun was rising, turning the downs to rose and lavender.

His hut was a cloghan, a big stone beehive at the corner of a garth with low drystone walls. He put his four strays with the rest of his flock. I climbed up the sloping sides of his hut to uncover the small hole at the top, by which time he and Regan had gone inside. He was poking up his fire of sheep's dung when I entered.

Save his tiny circular hearth, and the recess in the thick wall where he slept on heather months old, a few small belongings like pots and bowls, and hanging on the wall the treasure of his house, a pair of iron shears, there was nothing to see.

'Your name?' I asked him.

'Murd,' he answered. 'Aye, Murd. The dogs are Giff and Gaff. Good company—heh!—but they can't talk. Good having company that can. The more so as ye're British.'

'I am,' said Regan. 'Felimid is from Erin.'

'Erin?' Murd looked at me with awe. That was the other side of the world to him. Na, Cornwall was the other side of the world; Erin was beyond it. 'Why, that's where the spirits o' the blessed dead go! The snow never falls there, and there's no adder nor any other poisonous thing, and the man who breathes that air is made young again. Me father told me.'

'Truth,' I said. 'And gold is thick in the river sand, so that you can wash it out in wicker baskets. I've seen a farmer's daughter married with a gold ring on her hand, like the daughter of a great lord.'

'Eh, to think of it!' He lifted a crock of porridge off the hearth, where it had been cooking slowly all night. He shared that with us, and some stewed mutton, and we shared our bread, cheese and mead with him. The liquor especially put a glow in his old eyes.

'The king's own Yule brew,' I said. 'Never will you drink better.'

'Don't reckon I will. Here, I'll pack ye some mutton chops to be taking with ye.'

'Doesn't the king's law say they are not your sheep, but his?' asked Regan. 'And that you mayn't kill them for yourself?'

'Don't go making mischief,' I told her, tuning Golden Singer. 'We're none of us Jutes. We needn't care what their law allows or disallows.'

'Oh, ye're right, ye're quite right,' agreed Murd. 'But the king's law says also that if a sheep

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happens to die, I can have it. See?'

'Mmm. How did this happen to die, then?'

'I bashed its head in,' said he, belching comfortably.

But neither of them said more, as the music of Golden Singer absorbed them. It's my *geas* to sing and play in every house I guest at, and for whomever asks me, high or low, good or evil, friend or enemy. If ever I refused, the gift would leave me, but there have only been three times in my life I've wanted to refuse. This was not one of them. I sang, making it up as I went.

'See you the gaunt grey shadows
That move among the snows?
They are the wolves a-hunting,
As well the shepherd knows.

'See where yon golden figure
Goes gliding down the sky?
That is the eagle waiting,
When lambing time is nigh.

'See you the dark shape lurking
Beside the dry-stone wall?
That is a man come thieving,
And he is the worst of all!'

'Heh!' Murd ejaculated. 'That's wonderful! 'Ud ye sing it again, sir? I want to fix it in this old noggin. A real good song fer a shepherd, that is.'

I sant it again, and tacked on a fourth verse for him.

'Fire to frighten the wolf-pack,
And dogs to thwart the bird;
A stout ash crook to the prowler,
And that's how I keep my herd!'

The old man was delighted. By Cairbre and Ogma, I've had less appreciative audiences in royal halls, I have so! And there I've had time to display for them all the jewels of my art. But here I have to leave at once.

Regan had her straw-stuffed wooden shoes off and her feet at the fire. They were not frostbitten. Old Murd packed the meat he'd promised in our basket, while I laid Golden Singer away and Regan put her shoes back on. We took our leave then, and Murd wished us luck.

We had it. The weather was clear and still all that day. We came off the downs and into the Vale of Kent, where we had to go warily, for many a Jutish thorp and steading was there, and even a few villages. The Jutes are mistrustful of strangers. In fact, their law has it that a man approaching any dwelling of theirs must blow a horn or shout aloud three times, else he's considered an outlaw and treated as one. And I was determined not to do any shouting or blowing or horns, believe me.

Well, we crossed the Vale of Kent undiscovered, and still with no sign of pursuit from the king. I hadn't expected him to take this long. There were a few horses in his dun, though the Jutes are not a rave of horsemen, and that's to understate. Had they decided to follow us afoot, on snowshoes? Or

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had Kisumola failed in his divinations for some reason? Maybe he was exhausted from his efforts of the day before. But I'd thought that mere fakery, to give his tale credence when he accused me. No matter. The important thing is that we reached the Forest of Andred that evening, and whether or not Kisumola had exhausted himself, Regan surely had. She'd come twenty miles since dawn. She could barely eat, and though I could offer her nothing but a tree to sleep in, she slept like one dead.

IV

A FOREST IN WINTER has beauty all its own. Snow lay crisp and white as the flesh of an apple in drifts and piles between the black boles of ancient trees. Above us the interlaced twigs of the forest roof were sheathed in ice, like shapes of brittle glass, and the dawn turned them a glowing prismatic pink. It gave the look of warmth—for a while—but not the feel. A robin eyed us from among the prickly leaves of a lone dark green holly. His breast was red as the berries. I whistled at him in his own language.

Regan was asleep yet. More often I doss in a tree than a bed, as I'd told her, but she was too tender for much of that. I'd have to find her real shelter before night came again.

That could wait, though; breakfast could not. I gathered the makings of a fire from the odd places you can find dry fuel if you know how to look, and soon had a small smokeless blaze between the roots of Regan's tree. We'd eaten Murd's mutton chops, but that was all right. Besides our dry kindling, I'd uncovered a pair of hedgehogs, round spiky balls of delicate meat grown fat for their winter doze, good eating. I packed them in clay and buried them in the coals. When they were done, spines and skin would come off with the clay. I slavered at the thought, and looted a squirrel's hoard in the meantime. Roast chestnuts would go well with hedgehogs.

Regan stirred at last and climbed stiffly down. 'I ache in every joint,' she said, making a face of rue. 'Is that cooking I can smell?'

'It is. I'd be mighty remiss if I fetched you into the forest and then let you die of hunger. Here.'

We ate eagerly, and left nothing. Even the few crumbs of bread from our basket we shared with the robin, but he was too cautious to come close. A lad after my own heart.

'Ah, that was good!' Regan declared. Then, soberly, 'Oisc will not be far behind us. You know that.'

'Surely. But here in the forest the advantage is mine. I'll make Oisc and his pack of dogs wish they had never seen it! Now let's go a little deeper into it, where we can welcome him properly.'

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We'd gone perhaps a mile when a wolf howled behind us. Soho! The scout for a pack had found our scent. He was answered, but I saw nothing to fear. It's natural for wolves to pass on what knowledge they find, but even a strong pack won't make a man its prey unless he's feeble or they themselves are starving, and this was a mild winter for Kent. (The hard snowfall that had buried us on the downs had been the first such this year, and didn't look like repeating itself.) It wasn't likely that they were desperate enough to try us.

The rosy light of dawn faded, and now the frozen twigs, the small icicles, were dazzling white, blue, grey and palest, most frigid green. I kept my sling ready and my eyes skinned for game, but I saw none. That wasn't surprising: Regan's clumsy movements were scaring it all into immobility or flight. I didn't tell her so, because it wasn't her fault that nobody had taught her how to move in the forest, and tired as she was she kept gamely on. I didn't force the pace.

A couple of hours after noon we came on a crag like a clenched granite fist a hundred feet high. Abrupt and somehow menacing it rose from the forest floor. Dense growth tangled about its base, all but impenetrable, and a rough incline led a little way up its side to the dark opening of a cave. I decided to risk looking at it. If it had no tenant now, it would soon have two.

'Stay here,' I told Regan. 'I don't know what I'll find.'

I scrambled up there, Kincaid bare in my hand. The Ogam inscriptions on his blade caught the light of my Lord the Sun. I trod cautiously into the cave. The warm hairy stench of bear filled my nose and I backed even more cautiously out. Hes are bad enough when wakened from their winter sleep, but shes are a thousand times worse, for they sleep more lightly and often have cubs growing inside them. I didn't know which this was, and I can't say I wanted to learn. Let it snore on!

I was taken aback and not a little angry to find Regan at my elbow. I set an urgent finger to my lips and led her further up the crag, helping her climb the sheer part close to the top. We might as well spy out the land while we were here.

'What did you find in the cave?' asked she.

'A bear; and serve you right if he'd torn you to bits! The next time I tell you to stay somewhere, you stay!'

'I'm sorry.'

I looked all ways while the wind tore at me. West there was nothing but forest impenetrable to sight. East I could faintly glimpse the Pevensey marshes, where I had no wish at all to go. South of us lay the territory of the Hastings, and I had no wish to go there, either. As for the north,

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we'd gone to great trouble and risk to escape from it. West it had to be, then. I looked that way again. There was no more of concrete use to us to be seen than before; but I've always loved the forest, and maybe my sudden inspiration came from the view. I laughed out loud.

'Share the joke,' said Regan, stuttering a bit from the cold.

I led her to the far side of the crag, where it fell straight and grim to the snow. 'We're climbing down that,' I said. 'It's not as bad as it looks; there are plenty of handholds, and I don't want to go back past the bear's cave. We might wake him this time.'

'I'd rather risk it!'

'And another thing. When Oisc arrives, if he gets this far, I want him to see tracks leading up the crag and none coming down. So that is the joke.'

She thought about that for a while. Then she laughed, too.

We descended the crag on the sheerer side. I brushed away the tracks we left there, very carefully, for about a hundred yards. Then we hied ourselves west.

Late in the afternoon we found an immense dead oak on top of a knoll. A narrow fissure split the trunk, and inside it was hollow and dry, with dead leaves a couple of feet deep, the top ones rustling, the bottom ones decaying, but all soft. I stirred them up a bit lest we share our bed with hedgehogs or worse. Nothing moved but beetles.

'We couldn't ask for better,' I said. 'Warm, dry and commanding a bit of a view. We'll stay here til we've settled with Oisc. I mean, til I've settled with Oisc; I don't intend for him to get near you. In there and rest while I double back for a look. And don't go a yard from here without me.'

'I'm not that great a fool!'

She could behave like one when she took a notion into her head. But I'm not without tact. I said, 'Indeed. Then we can either stay here or press on hard through the forest. It's a hundred miles from east to west, so we can stay in it and still win to the borders of a Roman kingdom.'

'Which would you think best?' she asked.

'You have me there. I'd like to give you a certain answer, but first I need to know if Oisc is behind us, and how near. And if Kisumola is with him or not.'

'You might be wrong about his following us here,' she suggested.

'I think I'm right. I killed one of his men, a warrior of his own dun, *and* I stole you. Na king would eat afronts like that. I reckon he raised a hunting party the morning after we made our escape. They probably searched the downs for our trail, and if they haven't found it by now I'll eat dirt. So you see why I have to double back.'

'Be careful.'

'Surely.'

I circled widely, not going near the crag to confuse the misleading

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trail we'd left. No sight nor sound of the sea-wolves did I find, but the hunting got better as the shadows grew longer. Two hares dangled at my belt by sunset. One I had killed with my sling, and the other, in his leaps and sudden changes of direction to escape me, had obligningly broken his neck on a tree. As I bent down for him, a fox poked his head out of the brambles not ten yards away.

I stared into his bright black eyes. His jaws were parted a little in a mocking grin; his tongue lolled impudently and his breath smoked in the cold air. Behind his head I could barely make out the shape of his shoulders with their red, frost-stiffened coat, for the light was going fast. I thought he was interested in the hare.

'Sorry, fellow,' I said. 'I'm hungry myself.'

He didn't move, but made a noise that sounded mighty like a snicker. Then it crossed my mind; was this a familiar of Kisumola's? Or perhaps his spirit self in the form of a fox? It would be appropriate. And the instant I thought of that, the impudent head vanished. I had a glimpse of his bright red brush with its white tip, and then he was gone. I muttered:

'Fox, fox, go tell your master,
To catch Felimid, he needs follow faster!
His cunning is vast, but mine is vaster.'

I returned, cautionsly, to the tree, and I'll take oath I was not followed, by man or beast. We ate the hares. Then Regan curled up in both our cloaks and I went hunting under a full moon. That was a night, brittle with cold, brilliant with light, clear as the eyes of a hawk, everything silver or black. Midnight it was before I returned. If it hadn't been for the fox I might have gone to sleep at once, but I remembered his mocking look too well. I climbed the dead oak.

Aha! There, to the east, reaching even above the treetops, a leaping red glow! No mere campfire, but an enormous bonfire such as Jutes might build to keep the terrors of the forest at bay! They are not foresters, not them. Their kings and earls, with their household warriors, are pirates; their common men, farmers. So now I knew. And I was very sure they would not leave the safety of their fire before the day. I shook Regan awake.

'What is it?' she asked, low.

'King Oisc is in the forest. I've seen him, and I think his wizard is with him. I'm going to deal with 'em now. If I have luck, I won't need to do much. If I don't have luck, I may be gone a while. I'll circle behind them and kill them one by one. Those lumbering clods might as well watch for a shadow in the night. As for Kisumola, well, I'd welcome a contest, my harp against his drum. And I know who would win.'

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'You're mad!' she whispered. 'He'll have dogs with him, and a dozen men, or a score! You can't fight all those!'

'Did I say I was intending to fight them? I'll work by stealth, and lure them after me till they are lost. If I can't give any number of sea-wolves the slip in a forest this big, I'm not trying. Kiss me and take heart. Haven't you learned yet that I'm always right?'

She rolled her eyes and said impiously, 'God!'

'Yes, a few prayers won't hurt. I've killed a badger. Here. There will be a few meals on him for you, if I'm gone long. And listen; stay here! It's the safest for you. If a wolf pack besieges you, get up the tree. If a flying dragon attacks, hide within it. Within the tree, look you, not the dragon. *But don't leave here!* Because I'll come back for you, but I'll see that Oisc and his band don't, no matter what happens. Now let's have that kiss, eh?'

She gave it, but it tasted of salt. 'Come back whole,' she said.

'I always do—expected or not.'

Then I left.

V

DAWN.

I moved eagerly through the frosty caverns and grottoes of the forest. A gnarly maze it is, where each thicket and tree looks just like the last. The tangle of hazel and briar between the trunks is an almost solid wall. Ninety men and nine out of a hundred who left the ancient trails would wander in circles and die; but as I've said, I grew up in wild forests. Not that it mattered in this case. If I'd grown up in the desert I still couldn't have lost the trodden path yards wide I was following.

Eleven horses and six dogs had made it. The riders were sea-wolves, all right. Cairbre and Ogma! They may be dreadful to meet on blue water, but for blind ignorance of forest craft I've never seen any to match them. But perhaps they didn't care. Where was the need for caution in hunting two runaways afoot? Well, I would teach 'em.

And thinking of caution, I'd do well to watch my own back. I couldn't get that grinning fox out of my mind. Maybe he'd been an ordinary, natural beast and maybe not. But if a few of Oisc's party doubled back behind me after *I* had doubled back behind *them*, it would be a real joke; and they'd be better fixed to laugh at it than I.

The horses were little help here. Much of the time the men had to dismount and lead them, whacking a way through the undergrowth with sword or axe. In a while I heard the dogs baying as they plunged and bounded through the snow on my scent. Behind them, closer to me, sounded the crackling and crashing of icy thickets. Then I came upon the straggler.

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His horse's reins were hung carelessly on a thicket. He was pissing in clouds of steam with his back to me. A three years' child could have cut his throat then. I was about to do it myself, ill-advised though I knew it would be, on the principle that chances missed don't come back. Once the others noticed he was gone, they were bound to retrace their steps to look for him, beating up the brush in a line. If I couldn't then slay a couple more before they suspected they were being stalked, I was a Jute.

I moved closer, and slid forth my knife.

The dogs in the lead set up a sudden frenzied clamour, and I heard the raised voice of King Oisc himself. I'd reckoned he would lead the hunt. The old wolf had the vitality of a man three decades younger, I'll say that for him. His words came clearly to me through the ancient trees.

'By Wotan, I think we have them!'

It would be interesting to learn what made him think so. I lay quiet while the man I had meant to kill went blundering and stamping to join his lord. I'm unjust! He didn't make much more noise than a bull in rut. When they were all gathered in a close throng, I drew near and climbed a tree. I wanted a good view of whatever was about to happen.

From my perch I beheld the crag I'd climbed the day before! That surprised me. I'd never have thought we were so close. A forest's ways can deceive even a man who knows them well.

I peered through the branches. They were gathered below the mouth of the cave I'd investigated, and they were making enough noise to wake the dead, let alone the soundly sleeping. Oisc and his companions were ranged in a half circle behind the belling dogs, sword, spear and axe glittering in their hands. Aye, and Kisumola was there, too, sitting a horse like a sack of meal. I closed my eyes in bliss. But I opened them again swiftly, for I wanted to miss no part of what was coming.

With a shout of anticipation, the king beat aside the dogs and rushed up the path, followed by four of his men. They plunged into the cave. I waited while you might count nine. Then came a thunderous double roar that even I, safely distant, pursed my lips in a silent whistle to hear. The Jutes hurtled from the cave's mouth with yells of consternation. Two flung themselves from the broad ledge into the scrub. The others fled down the path much, much faster than they had gone up. A second mighty roar with that strange double resonance echoed after them. I chortled, hugging myself in delight. The beast that had made the sounds now shambled out on the ledge and reared up three yards high. The Jutes bellowed in shock.

I nearly fell out of my tree. Unlike the king, I'd been expecting a

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bear, but not such a bear as this. Immense in shaggy height and breadth, he lumbered down the crag towards the fools who had disturbed his rest. Two fearsome heads slavered and snarled on his shoulders.

Kisumola gave one appalled, woman-high shriek and tumbled from his horse. The bear is a sacred beast to his people. When hunger drives them to hunt him, as often it does in the far north, they do it with solemn ritual and prayer, and when they feast on him, they take care not to break one bone of his skeleton, which they lay intact in a cairn, asking him to forget that they killed him and speak well of them to the gods. So that mighty, two-headed monster must have seemed like an angry god himself to the wizard. The little fellow vanished into the trees, and probably didn't stop running til he came to Thanet.

The hounds met the monster with bared teeth. Oisc and his men did the same. They were true sea-wolves, too fierce to have sense. I relaxed in the tree's crotch and dangled a leg. This was justice if such a thing existed, and would make a fine show besides. *You roused him, King Oisc! Now you deal with him!*

A dog had clenched its teeth in the monster bear's right paw. The rest ripped at his flanks. A hunter dashed in with spear lifted to drive through the creature's kidney. It entered his hip instead as he wheeled, ponderous but swift, swinging the dog on his paw through the frosty air. One set of grisly jaws closed on the animal's spine and bit it in half. The bear shook off the fragment that still clung, and dealt the spearman a cuff that hurled him yards with a crushed head. Two more blows left and right destroyed two more of the dogs.

The Jutes surrounded him, slashing and thrusting. One aimed a decapitating stroke at the nearer head, but missed and gashed open a hairy shoulder. A second cleft a murderous paw to the wrist. The monster bellowed his rage and pain, surged forward, caught the Jute in a savage clasp, rent him hideously with talons and teeth, dropped the mangled corpse into the snow. Then he seized another and served him the same.

The hunters and their dogs drew back. One darted in from the rear and set hamstringing jaws in a leg. The bear promptly sat on him, squashing his flat, a sight so comical that I hooted with laughter. The monster knew something of tactics! Now his enemies closed about him again. He whirled in a small circle, as though chasing the tail he didn't have, striking with paws like maces. With ridiculous ease he stove chests, ripped bellies and shattered limbs. I howled encouragement.

'Hahahahaha! Take them, my beauty, my mighty one; that's it! Tear them, break them, spill their guts in the snow! Teach them to meddle where they aren't wanted!"

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King Oisc ducked a blow that would have knocked the head from his body, and split the bear from crotch to breastbone with one swing of his axe. The creature screamed from both scarlet throats as its entrails burst out like a nest of escaping snakes. The king lept back so that a hurtling paw did but graze him, and that was enough to topple him senseless at the bear's feet. Those of his companions that were left attacked like berserks, and one dragged Oisc from under the monster's jaws. The rest guarded his retreat. The bear tried to follow, stumbling in the coils of his own intestines, but could not. He collapsed ponderously among his victims. The few survivors passed almost directly below me. I reckoned they wouldn't be back.

The space below the crag was trampled, flattened, black and red with gore. Mangled corpses of men and dogs were scattered about like toys. At the centre of this devastation lay the bear's monstrous bulk, all crimson and brown. He'd done my work for me right well!

I searched among the dead sea-wolves. They had little in the way of supplies; that had been on their horses, and those had fled even faster than Kisumola. But I did find a little oatmeal and bacon, and best of all, several hunting spears were scattered on the snow. I picked one up, tried it for balance and weight.

From behind me there sounded a blood-freezing growl. I jumped a foot in the air and came down facing the other way. Cairbre and Ogma! The bear was not dead!

He came up, lurching, on three legs. The fourth with its maimed paw he held clear of the ground. His two heads lifted high. Hate glared from his red eyes. He lumbered towards me, spilt guts dragging beneath him, dead on his feet but refusing to lie down. I felt my scalp tighten and the hair on it lift. This was the thing that had left but four survivors of all King Oisc's band! Three, if the king was not stunned but dead. And those had run.

I hefted the spear, hurled it in desperation. It entered one foaming red mouth and came out below the base of the skull, severing the spine. The jaws snapped shut on the shaft, biting it through. He was on me then, reaching with his forelegs to hold me fast while he shredded me with his fangs. I hurled myself past him, feelng the wind of one great paw and —*ahh*!—the claws of the other. They ripped cloak, bearskin belt and tunic from my back, and raked it to the bone. Or that's how it felt. Hot blood burst forth.

I dragged Kincaid from his sheath. The great bear was failing, near to death. He had fallen on three feet again and was turning with grim effort to face me. By my Lord the Sun! What did it take to kill him?

Far more than it would take to kill me. My sight was blurring; I

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reeled where I stood. But I found the strength for a sudden leap and stroke that split the second head of the monster to the eyes. His three sound legs gave way. His two terrible heads sank low for the last time. He was dead in all truth now.

I backed a few unsteady paces from him, fell to one knee. Grimly I supported myself on Kincaid, both hands gripping his hilt. I wouldn't die after all this! I had to stop my bleeding. I had to keep my senses. I would not faint of wounds like a girl.

I would . . . not. . .

I didn't. Somehow I held on to my consciousness. I put a stop to the bleeding by lying with my ripped back in the snow. Then I contrived a rough bandage for it. After that I gathered the spears I wanted in a bundle, and tucked the bag of food I'd robbed from those who didn't need it any more, under my arm. I took the lot into the bear's cave. He didn't need that any more, either.

I returned to his body. I must be quick. Already the wolves were howling, and grey shapes were gathering among the trees. I cut out the bear's liver and ate some of it raw to give me strength. Two more trips I made to the cave with all the meat I could move. The third time I had to crawl. I decided I had done enough. With the rubbish in the monster's den I started a small fire. I didn't think the wolves would brave it to attack me. Not when they had such a banquet spread for them at the base of the crag.

And I didn't think I had Oisc to fear. If he lived to return home, he'd go believing us dead. He'd found Regan's tracks and mine leading to this very cave, and none coming out. He'd seen for himself what lives in the cave. He must conclude the bear had slain us. Most likely Kisumola would take it for granted, too.

I ate a little more liver. My back hurt as though it was on fire, but I was just glad I lived to feel it. I'd rest here for a while, eat again, and when I had back my strength I'd go to Regan. She would be worried about me. Well, I was worried about her, a little, but we'd neither of us be the worse for that.

I shut my eyes.

—DENNIS MORE

ON SALE NOW IN (SEPT.) AMAZING STORIES

TO GAIN A DREAM by **WILLIAM ROTSLER, WHAT IS HAPPENING TO SARAH ANNE LAWRENCE?** by **TED WHITE, DELIVERYMAN** by **RICHARD E. PECK,** and the conclusion of **MARUNE:ALASTOR 933** by **JACK VANCE.**

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It was a strange journey, from Bondeen to Ramur, but by no means as strange as that which followed. . . .

FROM BONDEEN TO RAMUR

W. S. DOXEY

Illustrated by TONY GLEESON

MY OUTSIDE CABIN aboard the freighter *Patna* affords me a good view of the city of Bondeen. It stands in the steaming tropical heat, the low buildings shuttered against the eternal sun. Once I asked a ruling merchant why they did not build tall structures to catch the sea breezes. He only shook his head, closed his eyes.

"Ashore! We dock in five minutes! All ashore!"

FROM BONDEEN the rails crawl upward like a roller coaster and the sheer wall of gray wet stone on the right stops you like a magnet from the thousand foot drop into the black sea on your left. I hold my breath and am not dizzy—yet.

There are many ships from all ports of the world in the snug harbor, and the weather is hot but good. The aging conductor in the impeccable blue uniform recognizes me with a polite nod. My ticket leaves his pink hand with a new pattern of crescents, through which the blazing sun pokes broken rings of fire.

"Bondeen is preparing for the festival?" he says.

I do not know of any festival, but I nod.

"This year I was to go, but at the last moment—" He shakes his head. "For me it is always the last moment. But that is life, yes? Good journey, sir."

Again, I nod.

AT LAST the train reaches the top and now the tracks veer away from the sea to speed west across a wasteland called *the lacsh* by those of Bondeen and *pridsch* by the inhabitants of Ramur at the other end of the rail line. I did not go so far as Ramur my last time out. My passport and expense account prove that. Perhaps this journey—perhaps there I will—but who can know?

Certainly not the two detectives in the rear of this coach, those

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heavy men in similar tan suits and hats, blue shirts and smart bow-ties.

Yes, they have been with me since I departed the ship *Patna* in Bondeen Harbor. Someone informed them I was returning and so they will watch me. This is the custom, I suppose.

But I cannot help wondering who informed.

NOW IT IS TIME for a smoke and I remove the clay pipe from my jacket pocket, unfold the tobacco pouch, and go through the motions. I remind myself to appear happy at the prospect. Actually, the odor of tobacco makes me ill, and joined with the swaying motion of this ancient train there is a good possibility I will throw up and cause a most disgusting scene.

Oh well, the pipe must be lit if I am to—

"Do you require a match, sir?"

No, thank you, I tell the little girl in the seat ahead of mine, I have my own match—only—I search my pockets—I cannot seem to locate them, so—

I would greatly appreciate a match.

She smiles, revealing several missing teeth, which no doubt have earned money beneath her pillow, and almost singes my nose with a silver zippo.

"I always carry this when I travel," she says. "You would be surprised how many forget their matches."

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Yes, it is thoughtful of you, I reply, sucking the acrid fumes into my lungs and feeling them burn the delicate membranes. My stomach groans, rumbles.

"Are you hungry? I have food also."

She shows me a small red wicker basket secured with a blue velvet ribbon. But I say, Thank you, no, I shall wait until we arrive at Ramur.

BUT WILL WE—ever?'

It is later. The child sleeps. She ate delicate sandwiches and drank two bottles of cola. For dessert she consumed a wedge of chocolate cake with chocolate icing. Her yellow linen napkin bore the monogram W. She sleeps with her head back, the missing teeth are noticable through her parted lips.

The train continues across the wasteland. I am of the opinion that both detectives have left the car, probably to sip from the silver flask one carries in his coat pocket. But I dare not turn around and look. It is better they think I am unconcerned that they follow me to Ramur. Of course, they know I know they are detectives, because they know what I am. It is a matter of good manners, and so they play their part, I mine.

I admit frankly that the child puzzles me. She is the first I've encountered. It would seem that her actions are honest and kind. She did eat heartily the same food she offered me.

Is she really asleep?

I would touch her, but now something is happening outside.

A village, in the midst of this bleak land.

Yes, and the train slows.

MY CAR HAS PASSED through the village and now stops on the other side. I counted fourteen mud and thatch huts. There is a Coca-Cola sign across the front of one. Goats and dogs wander in the narrow street. Several hollow-eyed children looked at the train, but they did not attempt to wave.

Why have we stopped here?

"Hellow! So glad you folks could make the trip! Just sit nice and easy and nobody'll get hurt!"

Two men in gray suits wearing black cloths wrapped about the lower part of their faces have come into the car. They point weapons at us, and now I hear a shot from the rear.

"Got him!" cries a voice from outside.

"Who'd you shoot?" says one of the men inside.

"Guy back here with a gun under his coat! Hey, his buddy's got one too!"

"Yeah, you know what to do!"

Another shot and now the men inside approach me. One says, "Your money or your life, mister."

I am tempted to stand up and give them the latter, but perhaps this is another amusing diversion, so I carefully extricate my billfold from my coat pocket and hand it

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over.

They are stunned.

"Thousands—there's thousands here!"

"My god, I ain't seen such since—I don't know when!"

It's all I have, I say.

"All? Man, that's plenty!"

I nod.

"Thank you!"

I nod again.

They start to move away, but the sleeping child stops them. One shakes her gently, and when she does not stir, uses more force.

But it is no use. She is fast asleep. As a lark they take her wicker basket.

The train moves again. The other passengers talk among themselves, but I remain aloof, even when one old man asks me how much I lost.

I lost nothing, I say.

"But they stole your money!"

To suffer loss, one must have, I tell him.

"I got took for twenty-one dollars!"

The enormity of this tragedy throws him into a mild shock, and he paces up and down the car, mumbling "Justice" under his breath.

WE ARE LEAVING the wasteland and I suppose Ramur cannot be too far away. Of course, I did not go all the way to Ramur on my last journey, so I cannot be sure of the distance. Ahead I see a mountain range, and now I feel the train slow as it begins the ascent.

The parched earth and brown vegetation are behind us. On all sides are grasslands and herds of fat, prosperous beasts. It is a pleasing sight, and so I touch the sleeping child that she might share it.

But her arm is cold, stiff.

I feel for her pulse.

It has gone away.

The food?

I cannot be sure, and I do not bother her again, nor do I announce her condition to my fellow passengers. It would cause them anxiety and would benefit her in no way.

I do, however, hazard a glance behind to the rear of the car. The detectives are gone.

I am on my own now, I suppose.

Yes, so I enjoy the view from my window. There is brilliant snow in the blue mountains. The sky is refreshingly without clouds.

"RAMUR! Ramur! Ramur!"

The conductor sees me from the train. He mentions the festival in Bondeen and brings his pink finger to the brim of his shiny cap in way of a parting salute.

I carry my suitcase and join the crowd which surges down a marble ramp and pours into the customs section. When my turn comes, the official squints at my bag, then nods and tears the last page from my passport, the one

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bearing the name "Ramur" in red and gold ink.

"Enjoy your visit," he says.

Yes, I reply.

The station building is not like that in Bondeen. Whereas the latter is squat and dark and damp, this one is expansive, lofty, cool and dry. It is roofed over with red tiles and spiked with thousands of iron lightning rods.

A guide wearing tan slacks and shirt gives those who are interested a brief yet informative tour.

"Ramur is the first city," he says. "Bondeen came as an afterthought. This train station was constructed a thousand years ago for the great trade of Ramur with all the known and unknown world. You will notice the tile roof, how it is peaked against heavy snowfall. The lightning rods protect from the frequent tempests which energize our precious city. Are there questions?"

"Yes," says one stranger, "how ancient is Ramur?"

"No one knows," the guide replies.

And I ask, Can you tell us how Ramur got its name?

"No," says he, "I cannot."

A BICYCLE awaits me. It is painted metallic green and has innumerable gears. I hitch my suitcase to the rack above the rear fender and pedal down the broad street.

Ah, the air is so light, so delicious—and the vegetation so perfectly green! What a place to be, I tell myself.

Or not to be?

No matter. No time for thought now. There is the ferocious traffic to deal with.

The lights change, bells ring, and I am caught in a floodtide of men and crazed machines. There are three-wheel wagons of knotty wood powered by oxen trained to walk in narrow circles turning gears which pull them and the wagon along. A woman passes on a unicycle driven by a triangular sail. Four men on a tandem bike toot their bulb horn and tip their derbies.

I steer to the left, pedal for my life, reach curbside and now laze along, careful that the hungry sprocket does not implant its wicked teeth in my fat pants cuff.

This reminds me—I have not eaten since the *Patna's* steward served me breakfast in Bondeen Harbor.

A small restaurant waves its silver awning at me. I squeeze the handbrakes.

WITHIN ARE certain small iron tables, each surrounded by four iron chairs. As I examine the menu, the waitress says—over my shoulder—"You are a stranger to Ramur."

I look back, consider her golden hair, the interesting thrust of her breasts, the trim flat of her stomach, the mystery of her cool green eyes.

Yes, and what is worse, I say, I

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am famished.

"You have come to the right place. Is that your bicycle?"

She points to the window and I see several boys handling my conveyance. Yes, that is mine, I reply.

"They will service it for you while you eat. There is no extra charge; however, if you wish to tip, they will not refuse."

Ten percent? I ask.

"Fifteen is the going rate in Ramur."

While I ponder this she goes into the kitchen. I hear a rattle of pans, the hiss of fat and fire, the bubbling of coffee.

My stomach smiles and tries vainly to contain itself.

I AM ON the street once again.

The meal was excellent in all respects—superb, I might say.

The waitress—her name is Leeroo—rides behind me perched upon my suitcase. Her arms are about my shoulders and her breasts pressing my back give me direction.

She has decided to accompany me, because I do not speak the language of Ramur fluently; at least this is what she says motivates her. I told her of the loss of my money, but this grim fact does not disturb her. Rather, she is more determined to render aid.

"It is a blessing to help the poor," she says.

I am not poor, say I. It is a temporary matter.

"A stranger in Ramur is always poor, no matter how great his wealth," she replies.

The boys also polished my shoes and added extra air to the rear tire.

I DO NOT ASK "Where?" No, I pedal through the streets of Ramur, in full knowledge that when I come to my destination I shall know. In Bondeen I was not so certain. Perhaps this is why I did not end my travels there. It is through experience that we learn, is it not? Yes, and Ramur, the lovely first city of all cities, will be my last great teacher.

"What do you say?" asks Leeroo over my shoulder.

I tell her I am thinking.

"We are always thinking, are we not?"

Yes, say I, but it is the process that counts, not the thought.

She laughs. "Now I am certain you are alien to Ramur!"

This bothers me and so I say, Had you doubts when I came into your restaurant?

"There are always doubts, for many come to Ramur. Were there not many others on your train? Did they not take the tour at the station? They are aliens, even as you."

I can only nod, but my thoughts flow onward, as does the bicycle I pedal through the streets of this cool mountain city.

What can Leeroo mean by her words? I stopped in my journey for food and was served by a comely philosopher who speaks the

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words of Ramur, not of Bondeen. In Bondeen, the city of the sea, there are few restaurants. The citizens eat privately in their shuttered homes. Ramur is a city of caves, of communal dining, where ideas may be exchanged.

Leeroo says, "You must turn in at the next gate, the one with the crouching lions."

THERE IS A courtyard, and beyond a walled garden in which a fountain feeds a crescent fishpool. It is cool here and the sounds of the city are gone.

Leeroo leaps from her perch before I come to a stop. I set the kickstand and stretch the soreness from my lower back. There is much shade here, but the sun is visible through the mango and banyan trees. The water of the fishpool flashes golden. The bell-like sound of the fountain, which I now see is in the image of an old man with cupped hands extended, reminds me of—I cannot say, but the memory is pleasant.

I am relieved, and why—?

Turning through the ugly gate guarded by stone lions I felt certain I would find grimness within. Yes, into my mind's eye came visions of human heads neatly stacked, of severed limbs, of men—and women— in black hoods holding white-hot instruments of torture. I now realize I felt this much earlier, even as the train left Bondeen and began its struggle up into the wasteland.

I smile at my groundless terrors.

Leeroo receives my smile with hers and tells me I must follow her into the dwelling.

BEYOND THE teak doors we are greeted by a strange figure.

He—or is it she?—swings down from a place high among the polished rafters. The doggish face and great white teeth confront me like a nightmare and I am powerless to move.

Leeroo extends her hand and says, "Igrish, we are home."

And now she explains.

"Give Igrish your suitcase. He is our major-domo."

Yes, say I, but he is also an—ape!

"No, a baboon, but he is quite clever and docile. His family has served mine for many generations. Come, let us go into my father and mother."

Igrish takes my suitcase and scampers away. I admire the sheen of his brown fur, his multicolored rump, the thick strength of his swinging arms. Of what does he think?

As I follow Leeroo down dim, spice-scented corridors these thoughts come and go. Now we pass through a lovely moon gate into a huge room. The ceiling beams are thicker than a man. The floor is a composite of colorful bits of tile. Several bright lights hang by chains at varying heights from the beams and create circles of brilliance. In one there is a man, in the other a woman. They

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are working with pieces of silver metal. There is the musical sound of steel striking steel.

Leeroo says, "My father and my mother, he is here."

"A half-inch socket, if you please," says her father.

I find one in the well-furnished toolbox and hand it over.

He affixes it to a rachet and tightens a hex-nut.

"Screwdriver," says the mother, who looks amazingly like Leeroo, except that for some strange reason she seems much, much younger.

And now I realize that the man—who she says is her father—also appears very young.

Leeroo looks quizzically at me. Does she expect me to speak? Very well, To her parents I make a small bow and say, Nice to meet you.

"Cotterpin," says her father.

"Oil," says her mother.

I nod and remove my jacket, which is immediately taken by Igrish who silently trailed us into the room.

I loosen my tie, roll up my sleeves, say, How may I help?

In unison the parents reply, "By staying out of our way!"

LEEROO AND I sit on the lawn and sip iced tea. I have been through the innumerable rooms of the house. They are dim, cool, exotic smelling. The architecture ranges from gothic to antebellum to Frank Lloyd Wright to oriental. It is a house which may never grow old or uninteresting.

Elephants are bathing in the river at the foot of the lawn. Leeroo says it is called the "Saraswati," but there is nothing in its slowly curling blueness to tell me why.

Perhaps—?

But my thoughts are diverted by a white bird who lands at the river's edge and dips his yellow bill among the reeds. And now my eye discerns the form of a sleeping boy partly hidden by the lush green grass.

Leeroo says, "My parents are building a Ford Tri-Motor. Do you know that craft?"

Yes, I reply, there are three engines—two in the wings and one mounted in the nose.

"Exactly. They are quite taken with aviation, but it will not last. People are quick to change their minds and their interests, don't you agree?"

I admit that such is indeed possible.

"No, probable," she says. "Last month they were wild about collecting butterflies. Do you notice that figure in the grass close by the river?"

The boy? Yes, he seems to be napping.

That is what I say, but I think otherwise, for now the elephants in the river are making terrible sounds and blowing white spray high above their gray backs, forming brilliant rainbows. It bothers me that the boy should not beware, for if they come this way—

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"He was my grandfather," Leeroo says. "He ceased to exist, for the moment at least."

I look closer. He seems hardly more than a child. And then I say, When did he die?

"Four days ago, on that very spot. His elephant threw him and in the confusion stepped upon him. I am sure the beast—his name is Tongara—meant no harm, for he had known grandfather for seventy-three years, but he was truly excited and—" She opens her arms in a wise gesture.

You have not buried him.

"We do not practice that barbarous custom in Ramur. Nature will find its own way in its own good time, for it is only the body that is involved. His true self is now somewhere else."

I drink my iced tea. There is mint and lime in its amber depths. The taste is sweet, perhaps eternal, and below us now the elephants leave the river by way of the opposite bank and, urged on by their laughing boys, disappear singlefile into the green, wet jungle.

THE SARASWATI beckons and we answer.

Igrish mans one paddle, I the other. Leeroo rides between us in the canoe.

The current leads us onward through channels made dark by overhanging trees and bright by the exposed sun. Birds of all colors call our names and we call back. Great grim smiling crocodiles peek at us from their lairs and I see Igrish tremble.

The river curves eastward, revealing a stony beach upon which we leave the canoe. Now Leeroo points the way up a dim trail into the forest. We find steps cut into the living stone. They are carpeted with soft vines that make a noise as of sighs beneath our strange weight.

At the summit a city of ruins awaits us. We enter silently and walk about for an hour under the cool gaze of dying statues.

"This is what was," Leeroo says.

I SLEEP and when the dream wakes me I ponder it casually so that new sleep may capture me if it so desires.

In my dream there are three of us and we live like birds in the desolate village on the rail line between Bondeen and Ramur. Hunters come into our lives and shoot us for our feathers, but we do not die. Now we are perched beautifully in the strange hats of glorious ladies strolling the grandest boulevards of the world.

It is not much of a dream. I am not surprised when other sleep does not choose me as its prey.

"YOU HAVE NOT SLEPT?" asks Leeroo.

A little, I reply.

"The bed was too soft?"

I shake my head no.

"Too hard?"

Again no.

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"Then it was just right?"

I nod.

"Why then did you not sleep?"

When I confess that I have no answer, she says, "The time has come for us to talk. Have you read the news today?"

Reading does not come easy for me, I say. There are too many languages, and besides, I am an alien.

She unfolds the paper and reads to me while I eat my breakfast.

" 'A Roman house has been discovered in Dover, England. It has pink mortar walls and the floors are covered with plaster designs.' 'A Nigerian was arrested for questioning concerning a human skull he sold to a curio collector.' 'Many houses in Guernsey are fixed with stone blocks jutting from their thick walls. These are said to be perches upon which passing witches may rest.' "

She drops the paper on the floor.

"How is your breakfast? Do you wish more?"

This is enough and quite good, I say.

"You wish more news?"

I shake my head no, replying, What you read is adequate for today.

"Shall we talk about us?"

I have no objections.

"There is little time."

In Ramur, I reply, there is time for all things—even time.

"True, but truth does not concern you and me. Do you wish our children to be male or female?"

Her bluntness is refreshing, and so I respond accordingly. Let us have one of each and one of neither.

She smiles, rings the silver bell shaped like a curious sparrow, and tells Igrish to clear the table.

"BE GENTLE," she warns, arching her back so that I may adjust for maximum performance.

I am always gentle, I say, even when I cannot be.

But her eyes are closed and so she no longer hears my voice. I close mine, too, and the world takes leave. We come together atop the same marble table upon which we took our breakfast. Her legs are smooth, warm, her buttocks fit my hands as though crafted for them. I find her breasts with my lips and the nipples greet me with warm songs. Her hands discover me and lend appetite to my great strength.

The baboon fans our sweating faces with a red and green tropical leaf.

THE BOY CHILD looks like Leeroo, the girl like me, which is the way it should be. The third child is a stranger.

I count its fingers and am amazed to discover it has but ten. Likewise its toes are of the correct number. Still, there is something about it which bewilders me.

Perhaps when language comes into its mouth—?

Leeroo's grandfather is gone. A

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party of Boy Scouts made good use of his body, fashioning the bones into monogramed artifacts, the sinews into strings for delightful musical instruments. His long hair they wove into thimbles for the blind.

THE FORD TRI-MOTOR is completed. Leeroo's mother and father abandoned the project in fits of anger and devoted themselves to playing house. We took the tools in hand. Our son and daughter and—it—helped.

We take her parents out to the lawn and show them the marvelous craft.

"I want a sailboat!" her father says.

"I want a new dolly!" says her mother.

My poor son squints at them through his thick glasses and, brushing a wisp of gray hair from his face, says, "Does nothing ever satisfy you?"

My daughter is so concerned that she breaks into terrible sobs.

It—Jiklzy—makes no remark; however, its gaze might strike them dead, if they were mature enough to understand.

But, as Leeroo is always saying, we must be tolerant. Our time will come.

The plane is ready, I say.

"You will fly it," Leeroo tells her father.

"I want a drum!" he exclaims.

Mother, you will fly it?

"I want a coloring book!"

Leeroo?

She solves the problem quickly. "Igrish, put on your helmet and goggles."

And so we are strapped in our seats awaiting takeoff. There is one complication, however. Tongara the elephant has taken up a complex position on the lawn and, trunk in air, refuses to budge.

My son, who fancies himself a droll fellow, says, "If he won't move, run over his ass!"

This is the view my daughter takes.

Jiklzy gives the great gray beast his most meaningful finger.

All to no avail.

I am on the verge of saying let us try again tomorrow, when the intrepid Igrish turns the wheel hard left and taxies the ship broadship to the elephant.

"Now we'll see some action!" says my son.

And, yes, we do.

For written across the fuselage of the Ford Tri-Motor is a formula worked out by my own Jiklzy expressing in subtle mathematical terms the intricate relationship between life and death:

$$\frac{A}{M} + \frac{H}{A} = 1$$

Tongara bows and makes available his copious trunk as a wind indicator. We lurch across the lawn as far as the river.

The plane sinks slowly and no one is lost.

LET ME ASSURE YOU while there

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is still time that life in Ramur at the house of Leeroo is not, contrary to the above, all pleasure. Many eras ago the city's economy was based upon slavery. Leeroo's family amassed a neat fortune dealing in chains, locks, keys, and files. Her grandfather's death caused many complications by virtue of a disputed will naming Igrish and his seventeen cousins as coequal beneficiaries.

No sooner had a settlement been reached than my son and daughter and Jiklzy completed the final year of schooling by graduating from kindergarden. Their gray hair is now a lovely unclouded black and none has further need of eyeglasses. They had much to learn and I am pleased by their progress. They are perfectly normal in every respect, thank god.

They are also typical of their generation. Without the slightest provocation my son often takes off his heavy leather belt and whips me. And my daughter frequently sends me to my room when I've done nothing at all!

RAMUR THE CITY is increasing in size. I do not fully understand what is happening. All I know for certain is that it now takes me much longer to pedal my bicycle to the train station than when I first arrived.

Is the earth's circumference increasing? Perhaps some joker put smaller wheels on my bike?

I would ask Jiklzy who, unburdened by sex, is a perfect genius. But he does not at all like me, his own father!

Of course, he has good reason.

Ha-ha-ha—!

You see—ha!

I cannot help laughing when I recall what Leeroo and I did to him!

Yes—ha-ha—he was so fussy about everything—no fun at all, if you know what I mean. So we —ha-ha-ha—Leeroo and I—yes, we got us a plain brown paper bag and went down by the river and filled it with awful smelling pooh-pooh from the elephants—ha-ha. And then—*then* we put it outside Jiklzy's door and I —ho-ho—poured gas—just a little—on it and Leeroo struck a match. I rang the bell and we hid in the bushes by the wall. When Jiklzy saw the fire—ha-ha-ha—his eyes bulged and he tried to stamp it out. He was wearing his felt slippers and you can guess what happened!

Ho-ho-ho—!

So he doesn't like his father and mother anymore, who cares?

We don't!

TONGARA DID something very very mean today.

Yes he did!

Do you know what it was?

He stepped on Leeroo.

I told him not to, but as usual he didn't pay any attention and afterwards when I said "Why?" he wouldn't tell me.

That made me mad.

So I picked up this big jagged

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rock and when he turned his back—know what I did?

That's right! I let him have it, right in his you-know-what-ses!

Did he run! And then he rolled over and over across the whole backyard down to the river. He plunged in and swam back and forth underwater with only his trunk in the air.

LEEROO HAS GONE AWAY.

The ants kindly carried her upon their red backs. I watched them, after first carefully positioning myself upwind to avoid capturing any of her essence.

Her shiny bones gave them much trouble. I wanted to lend a hand, but I could not, no matter how they asked. Ants are very smart, though, and they solved the problem by simply burrowing beneath the bones. They dropped into the earth, and the ants covered them over and planted grass seeds to hide the place.

NOW I HAVE more important things to do than watch the labors of ants. Tongara is my elephant. I live with him and the other elephants and their boys in the village beyond the river near where the city of ruins stands.

Tongara can forget nothing. Some nights when he cannot sleep he tells me many strange things. He is a tolerant being, though, and so he treats me kindly.

The other boys and I ride the elephants into the teak forests each day, and in the evening before sunset we take them to the river and allow them to bathe.

For our own amusement we play many games. We also tell stories. There is one boy who forever speaks of another place. When he looks into my face his brows knit terribly and he says he knows me. But I do not know him, except that he and I are now friends.

And as for another place, there may indeed be one, or many. For us though there is only the teak forest, the elephants, and the lovely river. We have each other. This is enough and we are happy.

—W. S. DOXEY

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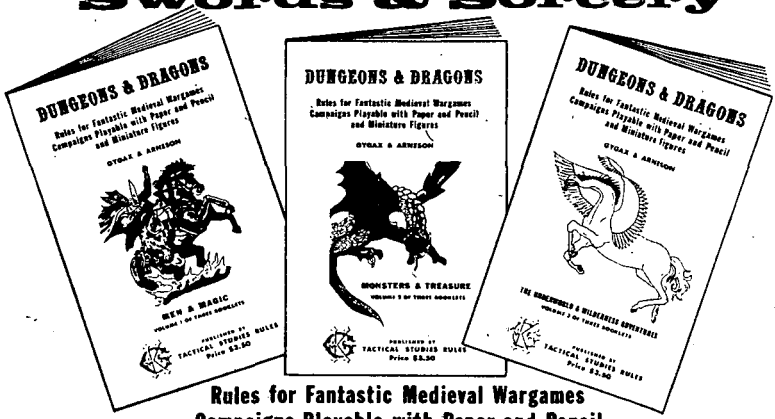
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As promised last issue, here's the full story, exactly as Addison Steele II typed it, personally vouched for by Ms. Hamlet herself, and approved by Ova's friend (and "keeper"), Richard A. Lupoff, concerning–

THE WEDDING OF OVA HAMLET

ADDISON STEELE II

Illustrated by JOE STATON

THIS HAPPENED in Canton, Ohio. The pronouncing gazeteer in the back of Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary says that the official name of Canton, China, a city of some 1,122,600 population, is Kwangchow. Webster's New Collegiate doesn't say why Kwangchow is popularly known as Canton, and apparently Canton, Ohio, suffers no such doubts.

The population of Canton, Ohio, is given as 116,900. However, this edition of Webster's New Collegiate is copyright 1958 and the populations of both Cantons may well have grown larger (or smaller) since 1958. Don't that tread on your corns?

Ova Hamlet, that lovable old lush whose subconscious seems to tap in on archetypal scenes of science fiction every so often, was born in Nottinghamshire, England, in 1949. She was living in Canton, Ohio, with her husband, Sir Duncan Hamlet, when this happened. Canton, Ohio, might seem an odd place for Sir Duncan and Lady Ova to be living, but there they were.

Ova Hamlet was there because she was enrolled as a patient of the Augusta Vassar Rehabilitation Clinic, a semi-residential drying-out farm for alcoholics. Ova didn't want to be rehabilitated, to be quite honest about it, but a judge in Oakland, California, had told her to enroll in a clinic or he'd commit her to a state institution, so she enrolled with Augusta Vassar.

Ova's husband, Sir Duncan Hamlet, had a job in Canton, Ohio. Canton is the home of the National Football Hall of Fame, a shrine for all the people, but there are a lot of other businesses there too. Bars, restaurants, laundries, supermarkets and so on. Most of them depend on the National Football Hall of Fame for their existence, directly or indi-

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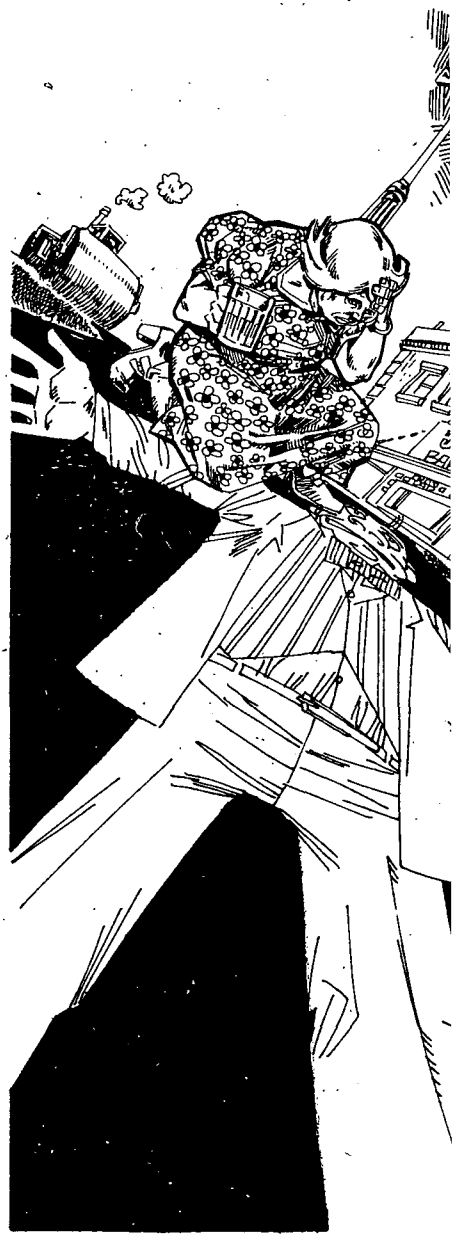
rectly. People coming to pay homage to George Hallas or Bronco Nagurski need a place to drink, eat, have their soiled clothing washed, and buy cartons of disposable diapers.

There have to be motels, of course. And there's a small branch of the computer works located just off the main highway leading into Canton from Youngstown, a city of 168,300 population, not far northeast of Canton.

The visitors to the National Football Hall of Fame don't care about doing much else while they are in Canton, but the permanent residents can go bonkers after a while for lack of outside interests. As Joe Philips, bartender at the Jim Thorpe Cocktail Lounge on Sycamore Street, says, "I really love football a lot but after a while it starts to tread on my corns."

One of the pastimes that the permanent residents don't often get to share with tourists is the Canton Hudson-Essex-Terraplane Club. Just about the time the judge in Oakland, California, ordered Ova Hamlet to shape up or ship out, the executive secretary of the Canton H-E-T Club died. He was an old man and had held the post for over three decades. He died after a long and painful illness so his passing was more of a release than a tragedy.

The Canton H-E-T Club circulated word to other H-E-T Clubs around the United States and Canada that the job was open and Sir Duncan Hamlet heard about it



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through the Oakland Hudson-Essex-Terraplane Club, of which he was a member in good standing. The vacancy in Canton was a lucky break for both Hamlets, or so it seemed at the time, and Duncan put in for the job and got it.

Later on it turned out that he got killed because of taking that job, which tells us something about seemingly lucky breaks.

Duncan and Ova settled into a two-room suite in the General Lew Wallace Hotel on Sycamore Street in Canton. It was a convenient location. The Augusta Vassar Rehabilitation Clinic was a short distance outside of town, near the computer works and the Tivoli Gardens Motel, easily reached from the General Lew Wallace Hotel.

The Jim Thorpe Grille was just down the block from the General Lew Wallace Hotel. The clubhouse of the Canton Hudson-Essex-Terraplane Club was across the street.

You might be wondering why Ova and Duncan happened to settle on a two-room suite to live in. The reason for it was this. One room was a combination bedroom-dining room. There was no kitchen but Sir Duncan Hamlet, who did the cooking, kept an illegal hotplate for cooking. The day manager and the night manager of the hotel both knew about the hotplate but they were both also members of the Canton H-E-T Club and liked Dunc so they pretended not to know about the hotplate.

The second room was the living room, but actually it was filled with Ova's collection. Ova's collection was the world's only complete set of the works of Killy T.

Killy T was a genius. He wrote science fiction. He had written 41 or 87 or 117 novels and somewhere between 63 and 2000 short stories. Most of his works were published by the World Classics Library of Los Angeles, a smut house that put split-beaver photos and titles like *Mouth Crazy* on Killy T's novels. They also used his short stories to space out the pages of pornographic magazines like *Black Garterbelt Quarterly*.

It happened that Killy T was in Canton, Ohio, for two reasons.

One was that he had been discovered by the literary world, and a major publisher in Waltham, Massachussetts, had offered to reissue a uniform edition of his works, if only he could supply copies and tearsheets. Killy T didn't have copies of any of his works, but he was on the trail of what he had heard was the only complete set in the world.

That was Ova Hamlet's collection. Later on you'll find out why she had it, and how she had got it. It'll really tread on your corns, too.

The second reason that Killy T was in Canton, Ohio, is that he was on the run. He'd started on the run from New York City and he figured Canton, Ohio, was as

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good a place as any to run to, and besides he could kill two birds with one stone by trying to find that collection of his works while he was there.

He was running away from a squad of goons working for the SFPA or Science Fiction Publishers of America, an organization devoted to keeping science fiction writers in perpetual bondage and poverty. SFPA was down on Killy T because he'd been discovered by the literary world, and if his works ever did become widely circulated and Killy became rich and famous, other science fiction writers might start getting uppity ideas and no longer be willing to sign slave-type contracts or sell their works for pittances.

Killy had even tried to unionize the science fiction writers and get them to demand better treatment from the publishers. He'd tried to enlist the aid of the fans and of the growing numbers of high school and college instructors running science fiction classes, also. The organization he tried to set up was called United Science Fiction Authors, Readers and Teachers Society, or *USFARTS* for short.

Don't that tread on your corns?

Canton, Ohio, seemed like a pretty safe place for Killy to hole up for a while, meanwhile trying to locate that collection of his works. But he underestimated the ingenuity of SFPA and its goons. It happened that an SFPA goon named Rupert Linwood had arrived in Canton hardly three hours behind Killy.

Rupert Linwood was a tall, unfinished man who wore mismatched plaid outfits, a toupee that never stayed on straight, and thick hornrimmed eyeglasses. He was very serious about his work, and never permitted himself to be distracted by such impurities as alcohol, tobacco, sex-except-in-missionary-position-between-married couples (which he regarded as a very beautiful and spiritually elevating activity), or nasty language.

Still, he was a liberal-minded person, and also smart, and he frequently attended bars and grilles in the pursuit of his profession. His profession was that of goon.

On this particular night, while the various members of the Canton Hudson-Essex-Terraplane Club were pursuing their various interests and anticipating the weekly meeting of their club which was to follow dinner, Duncan Hamlet was cooking potato pancakes in lard on the hotplate in the bedroom-dining room of his suite in the General Lew Wallace. Ova was in the living room with her collection. Dunc could hear her moan or grunt from time to time so he knew she was all right in there.

Downstairs and a couple of doors up the street, in the Jim Thorpe Grille, Joe Philips was polishing glasses and waiting for the evening rush of tourists leav-

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ing the National Football Hall of Fame and off-duty workers pouring into town from the computer works. The discolored mahogony doors of the Jim Thorpe swung open admitting a momentary burst of light, and a man in mismatched plaid clothes stepped in. He straightened out his crooked toupee and pushed his hornrimmed glasses up on his nose. He blinked his myopic eyes, adjusting to the dim light inside the grille.

"Howdy," Joe called to the unfinished-looking man.

"Hello," the man said in a whiny voice. "Say, I was just wondering, how would you feel about giving me a little information?"

"I'd rather sell you a little booze, pardner!" Joe laughed as he said that. He always laughed when he said things like that, so people wouldn't take him too seriously. Otherwise, he felt, he might tread on their corns.

"I'll have a, ah, a Shirley Temple, I guess," the man whined, pulling his plaid trousers up onto a red leatherette barstool. He looked at the picture behind the bar. It was a gigantic photomontage of great scenes from the history of the National Football League, a fine institution of which all Americans can be proud.

He paid for his Shirley Temple, leaving a nickel change as tip for Joe Philips. "I happen to be looking for a man named Killy T, a science fiction author by profession," he whined.

"Never heard of him," Joe laughed.

"Well, this is certainly a wonderful town you have here," the unfinished-looking man whined. He took a sip of his Shirley Temple. "You make a mean drink, bartender," he whined enthusiastically.

"Thanks loads," Joe laughed.

"Say, you wouldn't happen to have seen any of this fellow T's books or magazine stories, would you?" the man whined inquisitively. "They're published with disgusting pictures on the covers. I was looking at this one just the other day, really disgusting. It showed this naked woman with all her clothes off and this man—"

"Sure thing," Joe Philips laughed.

"Of course at least that was a woman and a man," the man whined, "what I really find offensive and disgusting is homosexuality. I think homosexuality can be discussed as long as we don't ever forget that it's a vile, disgusting sin and something hateful and wretched, but we can feel some pity for the poor homosexuals at the same time."

"Sure, 'scuse me, bud," Joe Philips laughed. "Hi, there, Ova, honey. Usual for ya?"

A puffy-faced, dumpy woman in 1948 clothing had come into the Jim Thorpe Grille. With a loud grunt she pulled herself onto a red leatherette barstool. "Double, Joe. Phew, you oughtta've seen the mess the old shtunck cooked

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up tonight, spud-flats in lard, I can taste 'em yet!"

"Comin' right at ya, dear," Joe laughed. "Say, how's it goin' out ta the Vassar Clink?"

"Ah, buncha bool-poop, Joe."

At this point the man in the plaids adjusted his toupee and swung around in his red leatherette barstool. "Say, I was just wondering, miss," he whined. "I'm trying to locate a science fiction writer called Killy T. The bartender here couldn't help me, but I've heard that he's somewhere here in Canton. How would you feel about helping me out a little bit with some information?"

Ova looked the man up and down a couple of times, belched some potato pancake and alcohol fumes in his general direction, and said "How'd you like to take a flying leap offa the Oakland Coliseum flagpole, buster?"

"Oh, that's hostile," the man whined, "that's really hostile. Well I never, I absolutely never—"

"Oh, fuck off, bub!" Ova said. "Say, Joe, gimme another. Leave out the avocado this time, willya?"

"Oh, my goodness," the other man whined in distress, "that's one word which I find totally offensive and unacceptable, totally! I like to consider myself a liberal minded person but there are just a few things, just a very few little things that I draw the line at and that word is one of them. I never permit anyone to say fuck in my presence. It's vulgar and crude and disgusting and there are perfectly good synonyms available for anyone who knows how to use the English language."

"Oh, Hinklish, didja sigh, ducks?" Ova cooed suddenly. "Hime English meself, y'know. From Nottinghamshire."

"Here's ya drink, Ova," Joe Philips laughed.

"So you want to find Killy T, do you, ducky?" Ova cooed. She went to the door and peered out through the clear martini glass etched into the frosted-glass panel in the middle of the wood. "Well come on over here a mo', ducky."

The man slid off his bar stool and made his way to Ova's side, carefully avoiding any contact with her.

"Just 'ave a look, dearie!" Ova said.

The man pulled a photo from his pocket. Ova saw that it showed a dishevilled white-hair wreck of humanity wearing dirty and ragged war-surplus khakis. Ova pointed through the martini glass at someone crossing the street and said "There 'e is now. 'Ere, ducky, I'll 'old yer cheaters so they won't get broke. Woopsie! Ah, ain't that a pity!"

She bent down to pick up the shellrimmed glasses that she had dropped, hard, on the floor and stepped on them, cracking the lens that the fall had not broken. "Oh, well, you must 'ave others, ducks!"

"No! Those were my only pair.

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Well, I have others at home on Transponder Cape in New Jersey, but none here." He looked at the photo in his hand, then squinted through the martini glass trying to see the man outside.

"No time for that, dearie," Ova cooed. "If you wants 'im you'd best move quick!" She shoved the man through the swinging doors, calling back over her shoulder to Joe Philips "Spud flats, I'll show the old bastard!"

Outside on the sidewalk Ova pointed to the man just crossing Sycamore Street from the General Lew Wallace Hotel to the Canton Hudson-Essex-Terraplane Club clubhouse. The man looked back and waved. Ova shoved the plaid-clothed Rupert Linwood toward a 60-ton Bucyrus-Erie steamroller that a road gang had left nearby and hissed "Go get the bastard!"

Linwood climbed onto the driver's bucket of the Bucyrus-Erie and set it into gear. "If I have one weakness in this world, it's high-performance steamrollers. The Bucyrus-Erie is the finest steamroller in the world!"

The man crossing the street was half way across.

The steamroller began to move forward.

The man crossing the street looked up at the cock that topped the Canton Daily Blade building.

The steamroller clanked into low sub-second gear.

The man crossing the street turned and saw the Bucyrus-Erie moving after him.

"Jesus Crhist!" he exclaimed.

Rupert Linwood, perched on the Bucyrus-Erie's bucket, grew pallid and his toupee slipped askew. "If there's one thing that is absolutely taboo for me," he whined through clenched, angry teeth, "it's the expression Jesus or Christ or Jesus Christ. That is one thing I will not tolerate. It's as if someone had called my mother a whore or my father a faggot!"

He squinted his myopic eyes and leaned forward to see his target. He pushed the Bucyrus-Erie into high sub-second gear.

"No!" the man screamed.

"Yes," Rupert whined.

The man threw his arms into the air despairingly. The Bucyrus-Erie steamroller, Rupert Linwood bouncing orgiastically in its bucket seat, ground the man into the summer-soft tar of Sycamore Street, Canton, Ohio, home of the National Football Hall of Fame, an institution of which all Americans can be proud.

Don't that just tread on your corns?

Rupert Linwood brought the steamroller to a halt and climbed whining from its seat. He walked back to the flattened corpse, straightening his toupee and squinting to see his victim. He bent double so he could get his myopic optics close to the face of the corpse.

Holding the photo of Killy T in one hand he blinked back and forth between gazing at the face

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in the photo and the one on the ground. After a little while he rose upright shaking his head.

"What's er matter, ducks?" Yes, it was that lovable lush Ova standing just across the corpse from Rupert Linwood, swaying gently in the early-evening miasma of Sycamore Street, Canton, Ohio, on a hot evening.

"Say, you really shouldn't have broken my glasses," Rupert whined, "I'm not sure at all that I steamrolled the right man!"

"Oh, my," Ova rasped, "oh, my, my, my, my! Not sure, are we, ducky?"

"No, I'm really not," Rupert whined. He adjusted his toupee with both his hands, the hairpiece having slid askew on his head when he bent to look at the corpse. se.

"Well, let's have us a look-see, shall we, dearie?"

Ova flopped down onto the corpse. She did it so that her knobby, dirty knees were on the corpse's shoulder where the corpse's suit kept them from pressing into the soft, black tar of Sycamore Street.

The movement happened to look like a clumsy parody of a genuflection. It really did. Don't that just tread on your corns?

Ova screamed. It was really a peculiar sound, something like what you'd get if you crossed an amplifier feedback with a set of badly worn subway brakes. It sounded something like this: *Yeeeeeeeaaaaawooooooooo!!!*

"What's the matter?" Rupert Linwood whined. "It *is* the wrong man, isn't it? I'll bet that isn't Killy T at all, is it? Not that I'd bet money, of course. I don't consider betting a moral or proper thing to do. It goes against my faith. But I'll bet that's the wrong man, so to speak, if you know what I mean."

Ova wasn't paying any attention to Rupert. She had rocked forward on her knees, across the face of the corpse. Since she was already kneeling, as if genuflecting, the rocking movement bore an uncanny resemblance to that of a Moslem bowing toward Mecca. Ova Hamlet. In Canton, Ohio. Bowing toward Mecca. All they needed was a Shriners Parade to come by at that omment, but as it happened most of the Shriners in Canton, Ohio, were also members of the Hudson-Essex-Terraplane Club so they couldn't have a Shriners Parade just then.

"Dunc! Dunc! You old donkey, Dunc!" Ova wailed.

"Do you know him? Do you know who this man is, if not Killy T?" Rupert Linwood whined inquisitively.

"Do I *know* the ole barstard!" Ova howled. "Do I *know* 'im? Why, the old fuck's the pa of my dear quints, 'e is. Or was. Till you done 'im in with yer fuckin' Bucyrus-Erie there!"

If Rupert had had his tortoiseshell glasses on his might have noticed an odd look in Ova's bloodshot eyes as she said this.

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But his glasses were broken, so he just said "I'm sorry. I'm really sorry but I can't take any more of this. I mean, how much of this can a man take? I was sent out here by the Science Fiction Publishers Association to do a simple job for an honest day's pay, and you come along and break my glasses, direct me to the wrong man to liquidate, and then what's worst of all you persist in using that disgusting word over and over again. I will not tolerate fuck. Fuck is a vulgar, degrading word for something which is under the proper circumstances a beautiful and spiritually uplifting act."

Ova Hamlet glared at Rupert. "Oh, Jesus Christ!" she exclaimed.

Rupert Linwood's legs became very rubbery and he collapsed into a sitting posture. He pulled a large yellow handkerchief from the pocket of his plaid trousers and began to weep and sniffle into it.

"Would you mind, would you just fucking mind taking your ass off my departed husband's face, Rupert?" Ova asked.

She didn't hang around for his answer. She beat a hasty, if somewhat zig-zag, course back to the dim-lit shelter of the Jim Thorpe Cocktail Lounge.

The National Fooball Hall of Fame, that wonderful shrine, had closed its marble doors for the day. Tourists were scattering to their motels, employees of the computer works were headed home from their duties, and the Jim Thorpe was packed to the gills.

But when Ova Hamlet staggered in, Joe Philips tossed down his barmop, told his apprentice to take charge, and gave his full attention to Ova. "What's the matter, Lady H?" Jim asked her. "You look like they'd just put the Volstead Act back in."

"That whining sumabidge outside," Ova rasped. "He just ran over my old man in a Bucyrus-Erie 60-tonner."

"Ah, that's too bad, Lady H. Listen, I feel a little responsible for that, so how's about you have one on the house to make it up, hey?"

"Make it a double," Ova croaked.

"Right!"

"Only where the hell am I gonna find a huge, shallow coffin to stash the old bastard in?"

"Couldn't you just roll him up?"

A grin spread across Ova's face like bacterial corruption spreading across the surface of a Petri dish. "By damn, Joe deary, I think that'll do it! We can bury him in a carpet-shipping tube!"

"That's the way, Ova! Always see the bright side of things! But look." He bent conspiratorially, putting his face close to hers. After one whiff he moved his face a little farther away. *Phew!* "Lady Hamlet, there's a guy in here looking for you. I didn't know whether you wanted to see him or

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not, so I stalled him. He's down there drinking that Scorpion's Stringer right under the pair of bronzed Johnny Unitas football cleats. See the one I mean?"

"Oh, that guy with the long straggly white hair and the ratty-looking outfit?"

"That's the one. Says his name is Killy T. You want to cop to him, or should I get rid of the creep?"

Ova squinted through the blue smoke-filled dimness of the Jim Thorpe, which in fact was widely regarded as *the* class cocktail lounge of Canton, Ohio. Her bleary old eyes watered a bit. "What the hell, Jim, sure, send the old bastard over to my regular table. After all, a widow-lady like I've been for the past ten minutes can't let opportunities slip."

Inside a minute Ova was sipping her triple Old Cobweb at a table and a tall, spindleshanked, white-haired old man was standing beside the table, bowing. "If I may have the pleasure?" he said.

His voice was rough and almost as unpleasant to the ear as Ova's was. When she didn't react violently against him he sat down, carefully placing his Scorpion's Stinger in front of him.

"I believe that we have some, ah, interests in common," the white-haired old man said.

"Bottoms up, dearie, and don't forget to be respectful in the presence of a new-made widow-lady."

A dim light seemed to flare somewhere deep in the cloudy eyes of the old man. "Widow?" he repeated.

"As of about twelve minutes ago!" Ova rasped.

"My condolences, madame."

"No need for condolences," Ova replied. "Serves the old bastard right. Spud flats in lard! My gawd!"

"Permit me to introduce myself," the man said, half-rising and then collapsing back into his chair. "My name is Killy T."

"Joe told me."

"And you are—?" He manged to get an edge of friendly inquisition into his voice.

"Ova Hamlet's my name and anything fun is my game, heh-heh!"

"Ah, Mrs. Hamlet—"

"Lady Hamlet."

"But of course, I would never suggest—"

"Lady not Missus, you old fool! My dear departed was Sir Duncan Hamlet."

"Ah, of course." Killy looked confused. "If this is not an indelicate moment, I had heard through various roundabout means that you are the possessor of a complete collection of my works."

Ova looked blanker than usual, which for he was very blank.

"I write," Killy explained.

Ova still looked blank.

"I am the author of *The First District Court of Thank-You. Maniacs in the Fourth Dimension. 2BR02B. Pan-Galactic Straw-Boss.* All published by World Classics Library."

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Ova still looked blank.

"Sometime they change the titles," Killy snarled in an amalgam of desperation and rage. "They called *Pan-Galactic Straw-Boss, Mouth Crazy*. My short stories in *Black Garter*—"

Ova interrupted him. "*Mouth Crazy!* Sure, I know that one, I have all of those books. And *Black Garterbelt Quarterly*, I have a complete set. Right upstairs in my room in the—"

She cut herself short. A look of what, in Ova Hamlet's case, would have to pass for animal-like cunning, crossed her face. "What fuckin' business is it of yours, T? You gonna buy the next round? Hey, Joe," she shouted in a voice like a Marine Corps Drill Sergeant at the Parris Island Training Station, USMC, "set up another round over here, my new friend is buying!"

Killy was moving backwards, his chair jerking a fraction of an inch at a time. "Uh—uh—uh," he was gasping.

"Shaddup, you," crooned Ova, reaching one heavy hand across the table and pulling Killy back by his ragged shirtfront. "As long as you buy, we're pals."

"Uh—uh—uh," moaned Killy T.

Now don't that just tread on your corns?

After a while Ova and Killy worked things out. This is how they worked things out:

They went to Ova's two-room suite in the General Lew Wallace Hotel in Canton, Ohio, and Ova told Killy to siddown in the kitchen-bedroom. Killy took one took at the bed, then took one look at Ova, and with a terrified expression on his face found an old crate and sat on it, as far away from the bed as he could get.

Ova made up a fresh pot of Econo-Master Instant Coffee Substitute with Foolzem-All Non-Dairy Creamer Sub and Juzlyke Artificial Sweetna. She and Killy drank a cup of that stuff, spiked liberally with Old Cobweb. For the second cup they left out the Foolzem-All Non-Dairy Creamer Sub. For the third cup they left out the Juzlyke Artificial Sweetna. From the fourth cup onward they left out the Econo-Master Instant Coffee Substitute.

A few hours later Ova got hold of the night manager of the General Lew Wallace. He was full of sympathy over the loss of Ova's husband, who was also the executive secretary of the Canton Hudson-Essex-Terraplane Club of which the night manager of the General Lew Wallace Hotel was a loyal member. Ova got the night manager to let Killy T stay free in the vacant VIP suite of the General Lew Wallace Hotel. The VIP suite was normally rented out only once a year, and the rest of the time it stayed empty.

The once a year that the suite was rented was the week of the installation ceremonies of the National Football Hall of Fame. During those ceremonies there isn't a

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vacant bed within forty miles of Canton. People stay as far away as Youngstown when the trade is heaviest.

Ova had made a deal with Killy. This was the deal they made:

Loneliness was no fun for Ova, and she disliked widowhood.

Killy T desperately needed to get those books and magazines.

So Ova agreed to let Killy at the books and magazines and he agreed to marry her.

Killy had been married and divorced three times before, and the fact of the matter is that it's far more remarkable that any woman would have married him than it was that they all divorced him. He even had a son, Leo, by his second marriage. But Leo had disappeared in Viet Nam and nobody was sure whether he was still living with the Viet Cong (as rumored) or not.

The only guest that Killy invited to the wedding was his new editor from the Waltham, Massachusetts, publishing firm, a fellow named David Harris. Harris had once bought a novel of T's called *Venus on the Half-Shell* for Dell Books in New York. *Venus on the Half-Shell* was a brilliant novel but Dell had gypped T out of his royalties and when Harris tried to stand up for T, Dell fired him.

Then they blackballed him from the science fiction field by circulating lies about him in the SFPA's journal.

After several years of near-starvation, Harris had got a job with the Waltham, Massachusetts, publisher because this outfit was not a science fiction house and did not receive the SFPA journal.

Ova invited her quintuplet daughters, who were able to attend their father's funeral and their mother's wedding all on one trip, thus saving a lot of money and travel time. She also invited her mother, Dame Stephanie Stepney. Ova would have invited her father except nobody knew where (or in fact who) he was. But her mother said she'd bring an escort.

This is the escort she said she'd bring: Rocky Mugglesworth, a tough, muscular woman who sometimes worked as a longshoreman on London's wharfs.

Dame Stephanie, ever the trendy social butterfly, had got into radical lesbianism this year and agreed to attend Ova's wedding under protest and in drag.

The wedding was held in the local Challenger Room, a onetime Essex dealership where the Canton Hudson-Essex-Terraplane Club held its annual formal affair surrounded by the same decorations that the Canton Essex agency had posted in the year it went out of business.

That year was 1930.

Ova's mother Dame Stephanie Stepney arrived along with Rocky Mugglesworth. They wore identical men's prison uniforms with consecutive serial numbers. It was

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a political statement with great meaning. You'll have to figure out its meaning for yourself, and when you do it'll really tread on your corns.

The quints, who'd happened to be in Springfield, Ohio, as five sixth of a touring all-girl basketball squad, arrived by Trailways Bus and were met by a 1927 Terraplane Limousine driven by Joe Philips in period chauffeur's outfit. When they got to the Challenger Ballroom Ova introduced them to Killy.

"This is Hortense," Ova said.

"This is Harriet."

"This is Hermione."

"This is Hazel."

And finally, "This is Howard."

"Howard?" Killy T snarled. "Howard?"

Ova blushed. This was something she didn't do very often, and when she did you wished that she hadn't. It was really a disgusting sight, especially when you consider what Ova looked like when she *wasn't* blushing.

"Howard?" Killy T asked again.

"I couldn't think of any more girl's names," Ova belched, "and I wanted another H so I called the last one Howard."

"How about Henrietta?" Killy T asked. "Or Helen? Or Helga? Hastur? Hannah? Hillary?"

Ova spat on the floor. "Too late now, goddamit. I thought of plenty once it was too late, but she's Howard, that's all. When she was a little brat everybody called her Skunkface anyhow, so I don't suppose it matters what her real name was."

"Oh, then I s'pose not."

Listen, everybody got drunk at that wedding, you wouldn't believe it. There was one skinny girl there, there's no way of knowing what she was doing in Canton, Ohio, because she didn't live in Canton and she surely wasn't a pilgrim to the football shrine, but she was something else.

Probably she came with the band.

Anyhow, she got into the spirit of things. She wore this red dress that showed every pore and follicle on her hide and this pair of really terrific sparkling platform shoes about seven inches high so she tottered around the party shining the sequinned stars on her dress in everybody's eyes and pouring drinks on top of people's heads. She thought that was pretty funny. She'd say "Look, it's raining booze. Whee!" And whoever she said it to would look up to see if it was really raining booze and she'd pour a drink on their head.

The musicians hitch-hiked in from the West Coast. The chief musician was a guy with long hair and a big moustache who'd once had a manager who gave lessons in crooked dealings to the executive council of the SFPA. They were eternally grateful for that.

The musicians hung around the buffet that the Canton H-E-T Club auxiliary had arranged scarfing down hors d'oeuvres and swilling

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punch spiked with Old Cobweb.

After a while Dame Stephanie and her pal Rocky Mugglesworth came up on either side of the girl in the red sequinned dress and started trying to raise her consciousness and talk to her about radical lesbianism but all she would say was "Look, it's raining booze, whee!"

So they gave up and went to work on the Hamlet quints, Hortense, Harriet, Hermione, Hazel, and Howard (or Skunkface). But the quints said that they were all the victims of mad crushes on the Crispus Attucks High School basketball team from Indianapolis, Indiana, and not really interested in radical lesbianism so Stephanie and Rocky went off in a corner to discuss ideology.

Finally the wedding started.

It was performed by a clergyman named Bill Curran, a bishop of the Boskonian Church. Boskonianism is a very small sect that sprang up some years ago when a fishing smack out of Bolinas, California, was grounded on the Farralones Islands. One of the fisherman, an old native from Saskatchewan, Canada, changed his name to Boskone and meditated on a mountain on top of one of the Farralones until he had this religion worked out, then he walked back down to the beach, walked back across the water to Bolinas, and began to spread his new faith.

His name was Bill Curran, but he was better known as Boskone.

Bill was very drunk at the time of the wedding, but he got a couple of the Hamlet quints to prop him upright, and between copping various feels he somehow got through the service. Here's how it went.

Bill said "You *really* want to marry this, uh, person?"

Ova said "Yeah, sure."

Bill said "Is that okay with you, grampa?"

Killy squirmed and said "Well, if there was any other way of getting at those goddam magazines . . . ."

Bill said "Yes or no, come on," and pinched one of the quints.

"Yeeks!" the quint exclaimed.

"Get your hands to yourself you filthy swine!" shouted Dame Stephanie Stepney.

"Capitalist-clergy collaborator!" shouted Rocky Mugglesworth.

Stephanie and Rocky started to charge Bill Curran but a couple more of the quints blocked them squealing things like "Leave momma alone it's her last chance to land a man!"

The woman in the red dress was dancing on top of a big electric organ that the band leader had brought along with him, singing "Look, it's raining booze, whee, look, it's raining booze, whee!"

Joe Philips was passing out punch spiked with Old Cobweb.

The members of the Canton Hudson-Essex-Terraplane Club were cruising up and down Sycamore Street in their Hudsons, Es-

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sexes and Terraplanes, revving their engines and preparing to conduct the bride and groom by motorcade to their honeymoon hideaway in the Tivoli Gardens Motel. They'd reserved a room for Ova and Killy so they wouldn't be shut out by engineers from the computer works who were cheating on their wives who thought they were away on business trips to the main computer works at Springfield while they were actually shacked up with female programmers who were cheating on their husbands who thought they were away on business trips to the main programming center in Bala Cynwyd, Pennsylvania.

Somehow Bill Curran stuck his head out from between the hips of two Hamlet quints and said "Howzabout it, T?"

Ova grabbed Killy by the arm and twisted hard, rasping into his ear "Say yes or I'll break this fucking thing!"

"Y-yes," Killy gasped, fainting from the pain.

"Okay, that's it!" grinned Curran.

Don't that tread on your corns?

They had a big buffet dinner right there in the Challenger Ballroom, or it would have been big except that the band had eaten up most of the food during the ceremony and would have polished it *all* off if the ceremony had just taken a few minutes longer.

Then everybody danced for a little while and they headed for the Tivoli Gardens Motel.

The Canton Hudson-Essex-Terraplane Club presented Ova and Killy with the keys to a perfectly restored maroon 1947 Hudson straight-6 coupe and would have retired quietly except that Rocky Mugglesworth thought she caught a secretary from the computer works making eyes at Dame Stephanie.

Actually the secretary wasn't making eyes at Dame Stephanie. Actually she was peering through the venetian blinds in the motel room where she was shacked up with a maintenance man from the high-speed card-sorter department because she was afraid her father would come by the Tivoli Gardens Motel and see her there. Her father thought she was at the National Football Hall of Fame. He didn't know that the shrine closed at six o'clock. But she didn't want him to see her from his car as he drove home from the computer works, either.

Rocky Mugglesworth went tearing into the Tivoli Gardens and pulled the poor girl out by the hair and they tumbled into the motel's olympic size swimming pool and had to be rescued by a squad of Hamlet quints.

Finally everybody was gone except for Ova and Killy and the regular customers of the Tivoli Gardens Motel.

Ova and Killy retired to their room, which was equipped with a florentine-style water bed, air conditioner, ice chest and all-channel Philco color TV. There

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was a bottle of Piggly-Wiggly champagne in cracked ice beside the bed with a card on it from the Canton Hudson-Essex-Terraplane Club.

Ova flopped onto the bed.

Killy cringed in the corner.

"Aint's this the nerts?" Ova said.

"Uh, uh, uh, about those books and magazines," Killy said.

"Ah, dearie," Ova grinned broadly, "you really are a man after my own heart. You must love those things as much as I do. Ain't that a backsnapper!"

"Well, you may recall Mr. Harris at the wedding, the fellow with the sunken cheeks and the hollows under his eyes?"

"Sure thing!"

"Well, as long as he's here in Ohio I thought we could turn the collection over to him and—"

"Turn the collection over to him!" Ova howled. "You must be more out of your gourd than I realized, mack! How could I live without my books?"

Don't that just tread on your corns?

Anyhow, Killy and Ova tried to work the thing out, and they finally decided to drive back to the General Lew Wallace Hotel on Sycamore Street and look at Ova's collection. Before they got out of their room there was a thump on the wall and they heard a discussion going on in the room next to theirs.

"Come on, Wilbur," a feminine voice said, "don't be so cruel to Alfie!" There were a number of loud cracks and gasps, then a voice started to sing "Look, it's raining booze, whee!"

Ova and Killy got out of the Tivoli Gardens Motel and headed back into Canton.

They parked their 1947 Hudson and went upstairs in the General Lew Wallace Hotel. When they got to the suite where Ova had lived with the late Sir Duncan Hamlet so happily, they sat down and stared at each other. There was a heavy odor of stale polatoes and lard in the air.

Killy T jumped up and ran into the living room. He tried to bar the door behind him but Ova was too strong for him and she got through it.

"All right," Killy cried, "all right! Tell me, what's your favorite? How many times have you read *The Smart Bunny*? How about *Plague on Wheels*? Or is it *The Gutless Wonder*? I've always had a soft spot for *The Gutless Wonder*, it was my first book. 1932, would you believe that, 1932!"

"As a matter of fact," said Ova, lurching over to a concealed cupboard and pulling out a fresh bottle of Old Cobweb, "no."

"No?" snarled T, "no? What do you mean, no?"

"I mean I never read none of 'em, you old squirrel! Here, have a snort o' this! It'll grow hair on your chest."

"You never read *any* of them?" T said. "How about the short

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stories? Listen, I've done so many, I don't know where to begin. How about 'The Dancing Fool?' How about 'Gilgongo?' Or "This Means You?' I always liked 'This Means You.' It has great inner significance, strikes to the most profound issues of our times, et cetera, et cetera."

"I never read none of 'em, you old chipmunk! Here, have a shot!"

"None of them? Not even a short story? None of them?"

Ova just swigged at the Old Cobweb.

That was when Killy T burst into tears. Hot, bitter tears.

Ova came over and put her arm around him and said "Don't take it so hard, honey."

Killy turned his watery eyes toward her. "But I don't understand. Why do you *want* all those books if you never *read* them?"

"Hee-hee," Ova cackled, "hee-hee. The pix, dearie, the nice split-beaver pix. They're really good. That World Classics Library must be a wonderful place. I just sit here by the hour sometimes looking at the pix. Look-a here." She pulled out the Summer, 1959 *Black Garterbelt Quarterly*.

"But that's the one that had 'The Baring-Gaffner of Bagnialto!' "

"Yah, really, did it? Lissen, honey, it has this incredible photo-spread of those two guys and this one bitch, look!" She opened the magazine to its center-spread, where the picture was tracked and stained with layers of greasy dribblings and smelled of a combination of stale whiskey and rancid lard.

"Argh," Killy T screamed, "argh, argh, argh!!!"

He grabbed a magazine at ramdon and ran from the suite. Just in case you're wondering, the magazine was the December, 1962, edition of World Classics Library's *Rubber-Garment Recorder*, whic contained T's story 'Madcaps on Mercury,' retitled 'Whip-Lover!' "

T tumbled down the stairs of the General Lew Wallace Motel and out onto the sidewalk of Sycamore Street. He leaped into the 1947 Hudson business Coupe and started its straight-6 engine. Before he could pull away from the curb Ova was after him, pulled open the door of the Hudson and jumped in, croaking "You won't get away with my treasure, you fucker!"

A whining voice seemed to penetrate the steel roof of the Hudson. "That's one word that I won't tolerate. I just will not permit the use of that word. It's vulgar and ugly and it degrades an act which is beautiful and spiritually uplifting when performed under the proper circumstances!"

There was a roaring and clanking and Killy looked in the mirror of the 1947 Hudson and saw a huge Bucyrus-Erie steamroller lurching after the coupe. A man wearing mismatched plaid clothes was perched on the driver's seat,

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squinting myopically ahead. His toupee was on crooked.

What happened next was this: The steamroller chased the Hudson coupe up Sycamore Street and out onto the highway leading toward the computer works outside of Canton, Ohio, home of the National Football Hall of Fame.

The Hudson should have been able to distance the Bucyrus-Erie easily but Ova kept clawing at Killy T trying to get back the December, 1962, *Rubber-Garment Recorder*. Killy had it out the window in his left hand to keep it away from her. That meant that he had to keep steering with his right hand. That meant that he had no hand free to shift the Hudson's gears with. That meant that he couldn't get out of first. That meant that he couldn't push the Hudson any faster than Rupert Linwood the publishers' goon was manhandling the steamroller.

Meanwhile the Canton Hudson-Essex-Terraplane motorcade which had been parading up and down the highway for lack of anything more exciting to do caught sight of the strange, slow-motion chase and formed into a convoy behind the Bucyrus-Erie, honking their horns raucously in the mistaken idea that they were still part of a wedding party.

Motivated by some desperate attraction to an even mildly familiar locale, T pulled the Hudson Hornet coupe off the highway and into the front yard of the Tivoli Gardens Motel where nothing but loud recorded music and the soundtracks of late-night television movies was seeping around the cracks of doors.

T swerved the Hudson around the edge of the olympic size swimming pool and pulled to a screeching stop. There stood David Harris beside a brand-new International Harvester Travel-All station wagon with a huge U-haul trailer attached to the back. He had a contract in one hand and a checkbook in the other.

"Got the stuff, T?" he asked.

Before Killy could answer the Bucyrus-Erie clanked into the motel yard followed by the Canton Hudson-Essex-Terraplane Club convoy.

Rubert Linwood, his spare eyeglasses at home in Transponder Cove, New Jersey, his eyes tearing from hot Ohio highway dust, blinded by the glaring neon Tivoli Gardens Motel sign, didn't see how the Hudson Hornet coupe had swerved. In fact, all he saw of the olympic size pool was a glare that looked to him like a well-lighted parking lot.

He pushed the Bucyrus-Erie ahead in high supercharged mid-third gear. It reached the edge of the pool and tipped over, pitching Linwood out of the driver's bucket seat and into the pool. Then it tipped over still farther and plunged after him, pinning him to the bottom of the pool.

The members of the Canton

(cont. on page 128)

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THE HAUNTED WRITING MANUAL

Robert Thurston tells herewith a simple tale about a man who wanted to write stories, and the stories he wrote . . . or at least thought *he wrote. . .*

ROBERT THURSTON

Illustrated by MARCUS BOAS

As Gregor Samsa awoke one morning from uneasy dreams he found himself transformed in his bed into a gigantic insect.

"GOD DAMN! That little sentence oughta grab 'em by the short hairs," Gaskitt hollered. "Never woulda guessed that storywriting was my game. Hell, writing's sure a lot easier than slaving at Fat Venable's lot, selling glued-together wrecks to smalltown meatheads."

Staring at the sentence, he wondered how he could possibly have thought up those words. Like Gregor Samsa. You didn't find a name like that in Brownsville. Perhaps he should make the name more American, like maybe Gregory Samson. Nope, only those letters arranged in that sequence surrounded by those words were right for the sentence.

He resumed typing. Words flowed onto the paper like sweat off Fat Venable's nose at the height of an Everything-Must-Go sale. The story kept getting weirder as Gaskitt plunged his man-bug character into deeper trouble. When the story was finally finished, its complicated pieces connected together like leads into a charging battery, Gaskitt wondered why storywriting was supposed to be such hard work. Hell, it was as simple as turning back a speedometer.

"GASKITT," Isaac declared, "you're the last person I ever suspected of swallowin' a dictionary. Jesus C. Ryan, I never even thought you could read."

Isaac was the town's great reader. You could always spot him from a distance because of the bent edges of a paper back sticking out of the back pocket of his levis.

"I'm amazed at how you even come up with this here title. 'The Metamorphosis'—pretty big word, I say."

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"It just popped into my head. I went to a dictionary and, sure enough, it turns out to be *exactly* the right word for a yarn about a man who's become a cockroach."

The wrinkles in Isaac's face regrouped into lines of suspicion.

"You ain't funnin' me in some way, are you?" he asked.

"On my grandpapa's honor."

"Careful, son. Remember I knew your grandpappy."

For the first time in years of pushing stitched-up best-buys, Gaskitt found the truth more exciting than lies.

"Well, Isaac, I was never much of a reader. Just the papers and auto manuals. But last night my toilet spilled over twice, so I went to the library for a book on how to repair plumbing. Right next to the plumbing book on the shelf was one titled *How to Write for Big Money*. I picked it up by mistake and was sat at a table reading it before I knew what it was."

"Know the feeling. Sometimes I'm halfway through a book and I see I already read it last week."

"This book said anybody could write. I figured that sounded like me, and I was comfortable in the chair, so I read on. Then, before I knew it, I was sound asleep. Strange, my head just plopped down on top of the book."

"Lotta books affect *me* that way."

"Next thing I knew, I woke up in the dark. Miss Flinch must've closed up the library without noticing me. Right then and there I

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knew I had it in me to write stories. *I just knew, Isaac.* Like somebody planted the idea in my head and it sprang to flower like a morning glory."

"Nice way of putting it, Gaskitt. Poetic. Write that down before you forget it."

"I had this gigantic desire to start a yarn. Guess it must've been inspiration."

"Y'know, Gaskitt, I'm real impressed. Wouldn't be surprised if poetry's your real vocation."

"Ah, I got enough trouble writing this stuff."

Gaskitt sent his story to a magazine that afternoon. In a burst of devotion-to-craft, he rushed to the lot and made a rather sophisticated proposal to Venable about what he could do with his current stock of Edsels and Henry J's. The fat man nearly broke his axle block in rage.

During the next tense days Gaskitt could not wait until the morning mail delivery, when he would search through the coupon-infested envelopes and unsolicited advertising for a letter accepting his story. He tried to write another one, but the words would not come to him. Frustrated, he returned to the library to consult *How to Write for Big Money*, especially the chapter on "What to do When the Words Won't Come." The book's style again worked its wonders. Gaskitt's nose was soon nestled in the crease between pages 42 and 43. This time Miss Flinch woke him up. There was an amused smile on her gentle ancient face.

As he awoke, his new story took place in his mind like a movie. On his way home he bumped into Isaac, and told him about his new inspiration.

"About two hired killers who come to this small town looking for a Swede they're supposed to knock off."

"What do *you* know about Swedes?"

"Nothing. I just feel it has to be a Swede. Story'd be ruined otherwise."

"You say so. Y'know, this artistic binge is makin' you look more like a poet every day."

"Nah, poetry's not my game. Forgot to get a haircut, that's all."

That night Gaskitt wrote "The Killers," then slept for two days, with brief awakenings to peer into an empty mail box.

After another period of staring at blank pages, he realized that his creativity seemed somehow connected with the writing manual. His inspirations always came after a short read and a long nap. He raced to the library, grabbed the book, and sat at his customary table. But this time his jitteriness prevented him from dozing off, so he checked out the book. However, an uneasy night and brief moments of sleep did not bring on the required inspiration. Hell, the idea was just supersition, anyway, might as well believe in ghosts.

"Gaskitt, you *really* look like a poet today," Isaac exclaimed when

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they met in front of the library. "Your eyes are bulging like brimfull cow's dugs. You look like ten nights on the town with the madam's granny. That's a real Goddamned poet's face all right."

Inside the library Gaskitt sat for a long time, holding the writing manual tightly between his large hands. Gradually, in stages, he slumped forward. His forehead landed with a thud onto a page illustrating the basic pattern of all formula fiction.

At noon Miss Flinch awakened him. As her features came into focus, he spoke fuzzily to her:

"Miss Flinch, you were in my dream. No—no, it wasn't you. It looked like you, but it was a man, a sadlooking man with your face."

"Only a dream, Mr. Gaskitt."

Awake, he realized that another story was taking form in his mind. He rushed home and spent the next twelve hours at the typewriter.

The new story, "The Bear," pleased Gaskitt because for once he dramatized a subject he knew about, hunting. One section, which came out of him in an almost uncontrollable rush, puzzled him. However, he was becoming accustomed to his penchant for obscurity.

Now that he knew the formula—that it was necessary to sleep with the writing manual *in the library*—he started every workday there. A few pages, a doze, and off to the typewriter, it became a disciplined schedule. In the next week he wrote "Bartleby the Scrivener," "The Man Who Corrupted Hadleyburg," and "The Beast in the Jungle."

He wrote so furiously, he did not even bother to mail the stories. Beside his typewriter an uneven pile of papers grew into a craggy mountain composed of "The Catbird Seat," "Rappaccini's Daughter," "The Rocking-Horse Winner," and "A Strange, Quiet Terror."

"A Strange, Quiet Terror" seemed different from his other stories. It related the experiences of a man, trembling on the verge of old age, who accumulated his many failures mentally during a Fourth of July weekend in a small town very much like Brownsville. In the end he crouched in a lonely room, crying, as a passel of fireworks reached their brightest intensity in a field below his window, and in crazy patterns in the sky above. Gaskitt felt quite touched by this story, proud that he'd captured the smell and feel of his kind of people.

A CLICK. Simple enough, hardly audible to normal ears. These days a mailbox click sounded like thunder to Gaskitt. His heart thumping, he delayed going to the mailbox. Maybe the click had been sounded in his imagination, maybe he'd open the lid and peer down into the usual dark cavern.

Three fat envelopes stuck out of the box. Three Self-Addressed Stamped Envelopes, three SASE's

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that meant rejection. His failure pushed at his insides like an expanding trapped balloon. He waited a long time before opening them. Was this to be his fate? he thought. To be one of those unrecognized authors whose acknowledgement comes only after they are covered with grave dirt?

Ripping the envelopes open, he stared at the paperclipped rejection slips. His muddled brain could not piece together the sense of them. He ran to the town hotel, and showed them to Isaac.

"Look at this one about 'The Metamorphosis,' " he screamed. "It says, 'not enough plot, insufficient motivation, too depressing for general readership.' And this one for 'The Killers.' All they say is "Who do you think you're fooling?' What do they mean by that? And this one for 'The Bear' says, 'As a friendly warning, let us remind you that severe legal action may be initiated in cases of blatant plagiarism. We suggest that you consider this, and that in the future you refrain from submitting to this market.' Plagiarism! That's stealing somebody else's work, right? Copying it and claiming it for your own. But I didn't steal anything. I made up my stories right out of my own head."

When Isaac just shrugged, Gaskitt ran to the library. He felt that the solution to his dilemma lay in that moldering building. Yet he was reluctant to search for it.

Hell, nobody ever got nowhere scuffling his shoes in the dust.

Miss Flinch turned from dusting off the New Arrivals bookshelf. Gaskitt pushed his sheaf of papers into her arms while she was still in motion. She bobbled them but didn't drop a sheet. Gaskitt told her about his stories and their rejections.

"I'm guilty of a lot of things, Miss Flinch. Selling used cars is a sort of automatic primrose path. But I never plagiarized in my life. In school or now. Never."

She examined the beginnings of each of the stories. Her eyebrows lifted and her mouth formed an oldmaidish pucker. She walked back to the stacks, to the section marked CLASSICS, and returned with three volumes. Patiently explaining how she recognized the true sources of the stories, she presented Gaskitt with irrefutable proof from works of Kafka, Hemingway, and Faulkner.

"Your inspiration derives from first-class sources. Are you sure you never saw those stories before?"

"I never even heard of these guys. They ever place stories in *Ford Times*?"

"Perhaps you read them long ago. It seems possible that, through some mental quirk—a special kind of photographic mind, perhaps—you remembered them word for word, without realizing you extracted them from long-forgotten memories. Your inspiration might simply be a terrific set of memory banks in your head. Why don't you let me see your

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other stories? Perhaps there'll be a clue in them."

Gaskitt brought her the other manuscripts. She ticked off the names of their original authors as soon as she saw the titles. "Hawthorne, D. H. Lawrence, Thurber. . ." At the bottom of the pile was the prized achievement, "A Strange, Quiet Terror." Dreading the truth about this story, Gaskitt had almost left it behind. He wanted too much for it to be his own work.

Miss Flinch's eyes widened when she saw its title. She read the first page, then leafed through the story. Her face whitened, tears came to her eyes, the rate of her breathing doubled. Her shaking hands fluttered the pages of the manuscript.

"Where did you get this?"

"Like all the others. It just came to me."

"Tell me the truth this time. Stealing this story is more reprehensible than the other stealing by far. You're guilty of more than simple plagiarism!"

"I don't know what you're talking about. I didn't plagiarize any of these stories, honest."

She started another accusation, but the words caught in her throat. Her expression changed from anger to anguish.

"Forgive me," she said finally, "of course you didn't plagiarize *this*. There's no way on earth you could have. I wasn't being logical, I'm sorry."

"Why is this story so special, Miss Flinch?"

"Come with me. I'll show you why."

On the top step of the stairs leading to the library basement, Gaskitt hesitated. A feeling very much like a hand on the arm seemed to hold him back. Darkness and clutter spread from the foot of the stairs. Ahead of him Miss Flinch stepped briskly downward. The stairs, while creaking, swayed from side to side.

"Come, Mr. Gaskitt," Miss Flinch said gently.

He descended unsurely into the gloomy basement. Down the rocking metal staircase. Past unused stacks holding books with ripped ancient bindings. Into a maze of cages, containing still older-looking books and piles of rotting magazines. The air was laden with book dust and the odor of forgotten words. He sidestepped the darker shadows.

Miss Flinch stopped at an old rolltop desk. Searching through a key ring which must have held two dozen keys, she found the one she wanted. With it she began to open a bottom drawer of the desk. Gaskitt grabbed her pencil-thin arm, saying:

"Don't!"

"Why on earth not?"

"I don't know. I don't even know why I did that."

She pulled open the drawer. What she looked for rested at the bottom of a dusty pile of jagged-edged papers.

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"This was my father's desk," she said. "I've stored it down here since his death thirty-five years ago. He preceded me as librarian here. I took over the job when he, well, when he went insane. This, too, was his."

She handed him the manuscript she had taken from the drawer. It was encased in a faded Morocco binding. Gaskitt opened it delicately. The paper was milky yellow. Its roughlooking texture was deceptive. A corner became flakes in his fingertips. He read the title page—"A Strange, Quiet Terror" by Richard Harwood Flinch.

"He wrote that in the early days of his madness, before it was detected. I have it memorized. Your story duplicates it word for word."

Frustrated and angry, Gaskitt stared at words which had deeply moved him when he had typed them. Now they seemed detached from the page, no longer his. If only he could salvage this one story, if only it could still be pawned off as his own work.

Hell, maybe it could. Miss Flinch was the only person who knew the truth.

What if he killed her, then crushed this decaying manuscript to dust?

If he did it right, it would look like an accident—an old woman falling in a dark basement cluttered with irregular piles of books and magazines. Why not do it now? Kill her while she still stared longingly at the ancient manuscript. He formed his hand into a fist and, raising it, calculated the distance and force necessary to hit the old woman's head so that she would be knocked out immediately, maybe killed with the first blow. He saw himself hitting her again and again until she died. With his strength it would be easy, over in a few seconds. He reared his arm back and aimed the fist at Miss Flinch's temple.

Before his arm had begun its swing, dust began to swirl all around him. The manuscript flew out of his hand as if violently grabbed. Several tiers of magazines collapsed simultaneously around his feet, tripping him. From adjoining shelves books started to fly in all directions. Miss Flinch screamed. Gaskitt, choked by book dust, struggled to breathe. Many of the soaring books fell around him, some striking his body. But the book which brained him and knocked him unconscious was Volume Nine of The Collected Works of Hall S. Caine.

MISS FLINCH, in male guise, danced through his dreams. About halfway through he realized it was not Miss Flinch at all, but her father who capered madly and kept shoving a book into his face. Gaskitt ran from him but the ghost continued to materialize from shadowed nooks of corridors between endless library stacks.

He awoke upstairs, on a couch

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in Miss Flinch's room. She and Isaac had laboriously carried him up from the basement. Remembering his moment of insanity when he had seriously contemplated the librarian's murder, he shuddered. He might have killed this frail woman, and only to save one of his stories from accusation. *His* story? What was he thinking of? It could never be *his* story. If he claimed it now, he would be committing plagiarism more reprehensible than the mere stealing of words.

Sipping orange-flavored tea, Miss Flinch told the rest of her father's story.

"He could never catch up with the speeding world around him. In his last years he was no more successful as a businessman than he'd been as a writer. He took over this library just to stay near books. He tried to make a writer out of me, badgering me into spending hours with notebooks, examining carefully each journal entry. He would get mad and wave books at me, literally *shove* them at my face."

Gaskitt recalled the book-waving man of his dreams, and nodded in agreement.

"But, after a long trial-period, he saw that I was my father's daughter after all. Perhaps literary failure is as easily inherited as any other trait. But my failure was his penultimate failure, I guess. One night he wrote that story, in an absolute fury of scribbling, and then he quietly announced his insanity. He died one summer night without even the accompaniment of a fireworks display."

The manuscript lay on the coffee table in front of Gaskitt. He was scared to touch it again. He saw this woman's father in the old-fashioned handwriting, with its quivery loops and uncertain curlicues.

"What was it made me write those stories so exact when I'd never seen them?"

"Well, I've tried not to think ghosts. . ."

". . . and it frightens me to think that my father is somehow trapped here in the one place he haunted in life. Can there be ghosts of urges, of uncompleted tasks, of impulses to rectify failure? Or is a ghost merely a frustration left behind? I don't know. I'm just a librarian. I catalog facts."

Later, after Isaac had left and Miss Flinch had resumed work, Gaskitt felt drawn to the main reading room. *The* book lay open on the table, as if someone had placed it there for him to rediscover. Gaskitt tried to turn away from it. He picked up a National Geographic, flipped through its pages. But his glance traveled easily from native breasts to the book on the table.

Hell, so he'd take one look.

The book was opened to a chapter titled "How to Write Poetry for Small Change."

"Most writers," the chapter began, "believe the fallacy that

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TO WHOM IT MAY CONCERN

GRANIA D. DAVIS

I first met Grania Davis when she was Avram Davidson's wife, almost fifteen years ago; she has since remarried and recently embarked upon a promising career as a writer. The story which follows is her first for this magazine; it will not be her last.

Illustrated by STEPHEN E. FABIAN

DON'T ASK, just don't ask. How could you ask when you aren't even here? You know what I mean? Cincinnati used to be a very nice place. It might still be, for all the news *I* ever hear in this God-forsaken place. Not like Los Angeles where you can't walk down the street at night, for fear, and you can't even get a decent kosher hot-dog, and the smog! True, in Cincinnati, you have to shovel snow in winter, at least you don't have to breathe it! But lemme tell you, Los Angeles would seem like a free week at the Hilton, after *this* place.

Do you read the newspapers? I know, who has the time, between shopping bargains and cleaning the house? I used to be lucky if I got a chance to watch *I Love Lucy* in the afternoons, or to play Mah Jongg with the girls.

But my son-in-law (married to my older daughter), Nate—he could've been a Doctor, if only he had applied himself. His father was a well-to-do man and would've sent him through medical school. But instead, he wants to do something "interesting" like photography. Nu, photography, he didn't even want to take pictures of weddings or bar mitzvahs, just trees, rocks. . . Are you going to pay good money for a picture of a rock you aren't even related to? Well neither is anyone else. So now he's working as a TV repairman. It isn't bad money. but not like a *Doctor.*

Well, Nate loves to read the newspaper at the table and interrupt the conversation every now and then with some (*he* thinks) juicy news tidbit. So who am I to complain? My younger daughter (the crazy one) and I aren't living in his house? It's true I do my share to help my older daughter with the cleaning and cooking, and turn over most of the Social Security check each month, but still, it isn't every man who would welcome a widow and her crazy daughter into the house.

One night (I think I made a

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meatloaf, with onions, rice and chopped egg, and served with browned potatoes, canned corn, and my older daughter's butterscotch brownies for dessert) I'm just pouring the coffee when Nate starts reading about the Communist takeover of some tiny country, Shungster, by name (may the name perish) way up in the high Himilulus.

This is news? Aren't the Communists taking over all those little countries, the people there don't even have a bite to eat? Some say they're taking over here. Who knows if it's the Communists or some other Mishigosh. My mother, may she rest in peace, hated the Communists like poison. She should know. She came from Russia, in steerage, yet. Eating nothing but herring and boiled potatoes, she shouldn't have to touch non-kosher food.

"The pogroms weren't the Czar's fault," she would say. "It was the fault of the Cossacks. If the Czar had known, he would have stopped them, but he was too busy with that crazy man, that monk. And do the American Communists think that before Russia drops a bomb here, they'll send a message for all their friends to get out? Hah, you should live so long."

Anyway, my crazy daughter—her belly is so huge, she can hardly get near the table; pregnant, I'm embarrassed to relate, by God knows who (his skin should turn blue, is all) . . . "He played the

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flute so beautifully," she sighs. I'll give *her* a flute, but still, you can't disown your own flesh and blood when they're in trouble. So. My crazy daughter perks up her ears. "Shungster! My God, that's the seat of the Tantrakrishna religion and the High-As-A-Mountain-Guru!"

Tanta Krishna? No relative of *mine*. . .

That sort of thing my crazy daughter knows all about. How to act like a normal Human Being, she doesn't know. How to take care of her own *body* she doesn't know, as witness her condition. But if it's some lunatic religion from India, Japan, God knows where, that she knows.

Once she went on some kind of Microbiologic diet. Nothing but tea and brown rice. I yelled till my wind-pipe was swollen like a fist. "A reducing diet I could understand," I said. "You could stand to loose a little around the hips, as a matter of fact. Why not have some cottage cheese?" But no, she's purifying her body. So what could I do? One night, I hid all the brown rice behind the sofa, and we had a showdown. "Either you'll eat properly, or you'll leave this house!"

So she left, for a while. But after she got herself in this condition, back she came. "This you call purifying your body?" I said.

So Nate reads to her how the High-As-A-Mountain-Guru was shot by the Communists, and how all of his followers are streaming across the borders into Nepal and India. She gets all excited. "That's what the Oracle predicted," she says. "The nineteenth High-As-A-Mountain-Guru would die a violent death, and the seat of Tantrakrishna would be manifested in a new land."

Big deal. But a few hours later, she has a bigger deal to get excited over, when her waters broke and the pains started. Off to the hospital we went, and it was bad, but is it ever good? And about eight hours later, she presents me with a grandson who, I have to admit, is the most *beautiful* child I have ever laid eyes on, except for two funny looking lumps on his shoulders, probably from the forceps.

Then comes the battle over the name. Oy, you should've heard some of her ideas. "Karma, Shmarma. . . Nirvana, Shmirvana . . . from Oriental mythology," she says.

"I'll Oriental mythology *you*." I says. "If you and your son want any further assistance from me, the child will be named after my late husband, your father (may he rest in peace) Harry."

She was too weak to put up much of an argument, so in the end, Harry it was.

The *last* name. . . ? Nu, don't ask.

Well, everything was going pretty good for a while, if I do say so myself. The baby was as good as gold, and a little doll (though he still had those funny lumps on

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his shoulders, which the Doctor said should be surgically removed).

Even the mother seemed to be settling down a little. She got herself a job in a bookstore, and instead of being so boy-crazy, like before, she was seeing a young man steadily, the manager of the Fiction Department, no less, who was looking at her with such cow eyes that I said to myself, "I'll be doing a wedding dance soon. I wonder if I'll be able to persuade my son-in-law, Nate (he could've been a Doctor) to take a picture of *people* for a change, to save the cost of a wedding photographer."

Well, one day, my little Harry is two years old, she comes home bubbling. I thought sure it was to tell me to start sending invitations, but no. She's all excited because the brother (may all his toes gangrene) of the late High-As-A-Mountain-Guru is coming to America, and is getting up a department of Shungtseran Studies at the local college, and she wants to go back to school.

"Ma," she pleads, "You know you always wanted me to get a college education, but there was never anything I was *interested* in before. I promise I'll work real hard. You'll be so proud. . ."

So what's a mother to say in the face of such sincerity? Shungtser studies, oy vey, But people study all kinds crazy things nowadays, and with a *degree* she could get a better job as, maybe, a Librarian. So I agree, and my crazy daughter is a school girl once more. (Go have children.)

But such a school I never heard of before. Instead of reading books, she's learning chants and meditation. Instead of gym, they're doing Dervish dances. Instead of Science, they're fooling around with secret incantations.

I buy her a nice pleated skirt, and saddle shoes to wear; instead, she shows up wrapped in a yellow sheet, for all the world like a shroud (may she live a thousand years), with a dab of lipstick on her *forehead,* you hear? Instead of her mouth where it belongs.

I'm about ready to put my foot down. This is no kind of thing for a nice Jewish girl, even one like my crazy daughter. But what can I say, her grades are excellent, all *A's* and *B's*. So I bide my time, hoping she'll get tired of it and switch her major to something sensible, like a secretarial course.

Worse even than her studies, are her new student friends (maggots should nosh on their nostrils). All dressed up in sheets, like it was a costume party, and the boys with shaved heads (and I used to complain about the *long* hair of her old friends. I'd welcome them with open arms, now. . .)

A lot of them have faces like Chinamen, and speak worse English then my late mother (may she see the light of Paradise). The only reason I let them in at all, is because they're so nice to little Harry, playing with him, and bringing him presents. He loves it,

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and I have to admit it's a pleasure to watch.

But try to offer these friends of hers a piece of soup-meat, or chicken, it's like offering them poison. And my crazy daughter imitates their every move, while the boy from the Fiction Department has been dropped like a cold Latka.

"He has a very low level of consciousness," says my crazy daughter. Too many pimples I could understand, but a low level of consciousness?

Finally the school year comes to an end, and I'm glad. I'm figuring to maybe talk some sense into her during the vacation. But no, she's been invited to join a special summer session in the mountains, and they want her to bring the baby along.

Well, I am furious. I tell her it's a crime to schlep a helpless infant God knows where, but talk to the wall. . . We have the worst fight in years, and the upshot is, she throws a few things into a shopping bag, takes the baby, and goes off with her so-called friends.

"You'll see who your real friends are the next time you're in trouble!" I scream, but she might as well be deaf, for all she hears.

I'll tell you the truth, I didn't close my eyes or put a bite of food in my mouth for three whole weeks.

"How could she do this to me?" I kept sobbing.

"She'll be back," says my older daughter. But somehow I knew that this time was different.

So one night, Nate starts reading the newspaper at dinner, how on midnight of Midsummers's eve, the great Shungtser Oracle spoke for the first time in exile. By now we're all interested in news about Shungtser (may the name be blotted out, may beets grow from the Oracle's belly) so Nate goes on to read how the Oracle, in his isolated, secret retreat, somewhere in the Rockies, put on the symbolic robes and headdress of his predecessors, and drank a mixture of tea and juniper berries from a cup made of the skull of one of the ancient Tantrakrishna Saints (how *nauseating*). After a while he began to tremble and have convulsions, and then to speak in a loud, deep voice, quite different from his own.

"The High-As-A-Mountain-Guru has been reborn. He has the signs of the many arms of Krishna and he is present in this room!" Then the Oracle rushes into the crowd of worshippers, grabs a child out of his mother's arms and holds him up. The child has all the right signs and is clapping with glee at being recognized as the reincarnation of the High-As-A-Mountain-Guru, and the crowd is singing and dancing with delight (may worms gnaw at their navels).

The idea of keeping children up until midnight! I prayed to God that Harry was safely in bed when all this insanity was going on.

Well, maybe you're smarter

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than I am. Maybe you've already got it figured out that these maniacs (may their nostrils seal shut) had decided that *my Harry* was the new High-As-A-Mountain-Guru, and that those small, bony lumps on his sweet little shoulders, which the pediatrician assured me were a *minor* birth defect, *easily* correctable by surgery, were the "signs of the many arms of Krishna."

Nu, an Einstein like you, I'm not, so it took a special delivery letter from my daughter (the crazy one) to make me realize what was going on.

As soon as I got the letter, my hands and knees started to shake like jelly ("maybe he's, God forbid, sick," I thought), and my older daughter had to open and read it. When I heard the news, let me tell you, my heart stopped beating for a good five minutes, and my older daughter says I turned the color of a flounder's belly.

"We're living in a palace," says my crazy daughter, "and being treated like royalty. I still can't believe it myself! They say that Harry will be given the finest education in the world, and when he grows up he'll be the supreme ruler of the Tantrakrishna faith. They want all of his family to be around him so he will have a happy childhood, so I'm enclosing a ticket for you to fly out and visit as soon as possible. We both miss you. Please don't bring any meat, or wear anything made of leather. . ."

The letter went on, but my head was swimming. Of course I would go! This was when Harry really *needed* me! I would go, and when I came back, I would bring Harry with me. Any Judge would declare my crazy daughter an unfit mother in two seconds! Let those lunatics (their blood vessels should burst) look elsewhere for their supreme ruler. My Harry will have a childhood like a normal Jewish boy. Plenty of chicken to make him grow, summer-camp, Chanukah, and a Bar Mitzvah with a good caterer.

Thank God it's summer so I won't look like a schlemiel at the airport in straw shoes and handbag (no leather, indeed!)

So off I went, and landed in some dirty little town in Montana, like out of a John Wayne movie. I was already nervous from flying (and had indigestion from their greasy little "gourmet meal") and it didn't help matters any when I was met at the airport by a tiny, dark Chinaman in a yellow sheet, driving an *enormous* black limousine, who uttered not one, *not one* word on the whole ride, which took many hours up the most twisty, windy, deserted roads you could imagine. I thought I would die of fright. It's a good thing I just happened to have a little something to eat in my purse, or I would also have died of starvation.

We got there, and it really did turn out to be a palace, but such a

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palace! It must've been as big as three city blocks, no windows, and all made out of red stone, with gold-colored roofs that were turned up at the edges like a Chinese restaurant.

"They're not what you'd call *poor*," I thought. "Maybe they hid a little something under those sheets when they left their country, or maybe they have a grant from a foundation."

The door was red and round and tall as a two story building. It led into a large courtyard, overlooked by the rest of the rooms. But instead of fixing the courtyard up nice with deck chairs and a BarBQ, maybe even a pool, they had filthy pens for cows, sheep, and big nasty dogs on chains, like they're maybe running a dairy. The place stank to high heaven—feh.

They led me in one of the smaller side-doors and down a maze of low-roofed, stone corridors and stairways that smelled like a combination of manure and cheap incense from an import store, and were almost dark except for some smoky lamps that smelled like burning butter (which is, of course, impossible). "This place could sure use a little air-wick," I muttered.

Finally, when my feet were ready to fall off, they took me into a gigantic room where the walls were all painted like Halloween, with crazy monsters, devils, and demons. The only furniture were some thick fur rugs and a big, fat statue of a gold and jeweled Buddha (money they have for jeweled Buddhas, but furniture and electric lights they can't afford!)

But who was noticing the interior decoration? When there they *were*! My crazy daughter, looking a little pale, a tall, unfriendly looking Chinaman, introduced to me as the Regent (may his brains dribble from his eardrums); and, best of all, my little Harry. They had him dressed in a sheet, and his curls were chopped off, but you can't disguise a grandson from a grandmother, and he jumped into my arms as soon as he saw me, with a big grin on his sweet little face, and started rummaging around in my (straw) purse, looking for his present.

We all chit-chatted for a little while about my trip, and how much it costs to heat a palace like this in the winter (plenty!) but finally I couldn't hold it in any longer.

"What are you trying to do to poor little Harry, you can't just take a kid away from his home and teach him your crazy religion just because he has a *minor* birth defect (which can be *easily* corrected with surgery)!"

The Regent smiles (his lips should rot away) and says, "This is Harry's home now. He will be taught all of the secrets of the Tantrakrishna Scriptures, will gain great wisdom, and will become our spiritual leader. Already he

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shows great promise. On his shoulders are the signs of a returning Bodhissatva, which will inspire faith in our people and fix their attention on good deeds and on a good life."

"Over my dead body," says I.

"There will be no need to sacrifice your body," smirks he. "Harry's spiritual development can be obtained without that. But our Astrologer has divined that you intend to have Harry forcibly removed from this place. This cannot be. His studies and spiritual exercises cannot be interrupted with tedious court battles, which will only produce low thoughts and bad Karma. Therefore we have arranged a comfortable little apartment where you and your blessed daughter may spend the days of your life in peace and contentment, removed from the cares of the outside world, and rejoicing with us in the holy Mantras and the teachings of the great Gurus."

I turn pale as a ghost and begin to mumble about how my older daughter needs my help, and my social security check, and a change of address card, and my winter clothes are all at home, and. . .

But the Regent only smiles and says that all will be done to enable me to adjust serenely, and then we are whisked off to this little suite where I'm relieved to see regular furniture, plumbing, electric lights, cable *TV*, books, newspapers, clothes with fancy labels in *my* size. . . .

I have to admit that it's comfortable. Harry is with us whenever he's not with one of his tutors, and seems very happy, and someone does all of our cooking and cleaning, but you can't disguise the fact that this is a prison. No one knows where we are, and we can't send or receive mail.

Even my crazy daughter is getting a little unhappy, to tell you the truth, she's been acting like a dog in heat since before she got her first brassiere, and these Tantrakrishna men definitely don't go in for the lovey-dovey stuff. She's even saying now, how she isn't the "enlightenment type" and she wishes she had hung-on to the fellow from the Fiction Department.

"You made your bed, now you lie in it," I tell her, sympathetically.

Naturally, it's not a love life that I'm missing, it's all my friends, my older daughter and her family, the January white sales. And the *food*! What I wouldn't give for a piece brisket or a little chopped-liver. All they give us here is a disgusting concoction of tea mixed with butter (you could vomit), yogurt, vegetables, and barley porridge. "What kind of diet is that for a growing child?" I ask my daughter, but she just shrugs her shoulders.

And the way these Chinamen play Mah-Jongg! Click, bam, swish, how can an American ever win? Listen, you'd think they invented the game.

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A SHAKESPEAREAN INCIDENT

Former editor Grant Carrington is back with a short story about a play about a ghost. . .

GRANT CARRINGTON

It was a dismal tour, but beggars can't be choosers: at least I had the fortune to be playing Hamlet. Me, a thirty-year-old bits-and-pieces actor, playing the indecisive teenager. Well, if Olivier could do it at sixty, I guess Erskine Callaway could do it at thirty.

I had just finished an off-off-Broadway spear-carrying role when my agent came up with this tour, sponsored by an educational foundation. They had rigged some kind of deal with Equity, as educational foundations will do, and for each Equity member, there were three college drama students. And now we were stranded in East Hicksburg with half the troupe down with the flu.

Ed Stortz, our Claudius, had it the worst, and was lying up in our grubby fleabag of a hotel, delirious with a hundred-and-two-degree temperature. The rest of us were staggering through rehearsal in the rundown old East Hicksburg Palladium.

"The show must go on," the director had said. He was a drama professor from some unknown university, and he was full of platitudes. While the pros groaned, the college students cheered . . . and the show went on.

From somewhere in East Hicksburg, Bob Hantover came to take the part of Claudius. I had to admit that he wasn't half-bad, better, in fact, than most of the pimply-faced students.

"Okay," Professor Kirchner said. "Let's take a ten-minute break, then we'll do a dress run-through before dinner break."

After dinner break would be the real thing, if anything happening in East Hicksburg could be said to be real. Bob Hantover came over to talk to me. He was a tall, gangly fellow with parchment skin and fine white hair. His beak of a nose gave him a superficial resemblance to Olivier.

"Do you always have a full dress rehearsal at every place you stop?" he asked. "I should think you would have this thing down cold by now."

"I'm afraid so," I said. I jerked a thumb in Kirchner's direction. "The professor there thinks we have to get familiar with each new theatre, as if they're all drastically

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different."

"I see," Hantover said, smiling with easy comaraderie. I have to admit he did have a noble profile, a good man to play our king, better even than Ed Stortz.

"I hope you don't mind my saying this," I said, "but you surprised me there."

"Oh? How?"

"You're a pretty good actor. I hadn't really expected it."

He smiled easily, not taking offence. "Oh, well. I've been doing this sort of thing for forty years now. I played Hamlet once here myself. Of course, it wasn't as professional a production as yours, but we did pretty good."

"Did you ever try to make the professional stage?"

"No." He looked off into the rafters. "I wanted to once, but . . . but things just didn't work out."

"Something personal?" I asked, not really much caring.

"No, not really. Just marriage and the usual things. My wife wanted to stay here."

At that point, Kirchner came up and, insinuating himself between us, clapped us both on the shoulders. "That's what I like to see. Teamwork. None of these little cliques. We're all professionals here, right, Ersk?"

"Right," I said, punching him on the arm.

"How's your flu coming along?"

"I'll survive," I said, half-wishing I wouldn't. Like half of the other actors, I was running a temperature. At times, the room wavered and I felt dizzy.

"Fine. Hang in there. We can't afford to lose any more actors." He left and I excused myself from Hantover's presence, drew myself a cup of coffee, and chased down some more aspirin with a cup of water. By that time, Kirchner had called places, and it was time for dress rehearsal.

We stumbled through the first few scenes until it was time for me to meet Hamlet's father's ghost. I couldn't believe the makeup job they had done on Willy Rubano, the college sophomore who was playing the ghost. It was better than anything they'd ever done in our earlier performances. But I guess they'd have nothing else to do while we were running through Bob Hantover's scenes. Still, it was eerie. There were times I could swear that I could see right through him. I wanted to say something about it to him, but it would have interrupted the flow of our run-through and, knowing Kirchner, he'd have made us go all the way back to the beginning of the play and start all over.

And then Willy spoke. Well, frankly, I didn't think he had it in him. His first words, "Mark me," were said in a quivery voice that sent shivers up my spine. Maybe it was partly my fever, but he really had me. I thought my heart would jump out of my mouth when he talked about his own murder: "If thou didst ever thy

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dear father love, Revenge his foul and most unnatural murder." If I had had to say more than "Murder?" then, I'd never have been able to do it. But the word tumbled out of my mouth, and the words of the following speeches, as if I were saying them for the first time, not parroting memorized speeches.

Then, with "Adieu, adieu! Remember me," he was gone. Somehow I got through the rest of that scene and the next one and, when the ghost said "Swear," I could have sworn the voice came from above me rather than from under the stage.

I stumbled off at last, my eyes watering, my forehead burning, and my head aching. I leaned against a doorway, glad that there were several scenes to play before I had to go on stage again. I looked up into Willy Rubano's ashen face.

"What happened, Mr. Calloway? Who took my place out there?"

I looked at him, puzzled. "What do you mean? Wasn't that you out there?"

"No, sir. I went out to get a couple of pizzas for the other kids, and when I came back, the scene was almost over. I'm . . . I'm sorry about it."

"But then who was it?" I asked.

"It must have been one of the other kids," Willy said.

"No, it wasn't." We both turned at the voice. It was the theatre janitor, a man whom we'd all seen at work but had never bothered to get to know. "It wasn't anybody in your company."

"What was it? Some kind of joke?" I was too lightheaded then to think of how difficult it would be to play such an elaborate joke. What if Willy hadn't gone out for pizza just then?

"It was the ghost." The janitor's voice had become a conspiratorial whisper.

"Ghost?" Willy asked.

The janitor nodded. "Twenty years ago, one of the local actors was killed in here, and he's been haunting the place ever since."

"Well, that sure makes a nice story," I said.

"But what's he still haunting the place for?" Willy asked. *He*, at least, had been taken in by the janitor's story.

"They say he's looking for his murderer. You see, the mystery was never solved."

"You watch a lot of TV, don't you?" I said.

"I usually watch *The Lucy Show* and things like that," he said.

I nodded. "Stick to it. It's a lot safer than putting silly ideas in kids' heads."

"Ask Bob Hantover. He'll tell you. He was here then."

"Sure. I'll do that." I had no intention of doing so, however. Hantover seemed like a level-headed sort, but you never can tell. If he believed in the East Hicksburg ghost, he'd leave the cast and we'd be in trouble again. Though come to think of it,

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maybe then Kirchner would have to call off the performance.

That line of thinking came to a halt when one of the stage managers dragged me back to the wings for my next entrance.

THE REST of the rehearsal passed, however slowly, without any more such incidents. When the ghost appeared again in Act III, it was Willy Rubano in his ludicrous phosphorescent makeup.

At dinner break, I stumbled to my hotel room, set the alarm, and flung myself on the bed. My stomach was in no mood for food, and I was feeling miserable. I groaned and tossed, unable to get to sleep immediately, feeling beads of sweat forming on my forehead, until at last I fell into a fitful slumber.

When I awoke at last, the room was dark. I jumped out of bed immediately and was immediately sorry. My head throbbed mercilessly and I fell back onto the bed, momentarily dizzy. I took a painful deep breath that made my head throb even more strongly but at least cleared the dizziness away, and turned on the light. That didn't help my headache either, and I had to squint at the alarm clock. It was ten o'clock! The show was already almost over. I couldn't understand it. I felt the alarm. Apparently I had turned it off in my sleep. Still, someone should have come to wake me up when I hadn't signed in before showtime.

I dressed as quickly as possible and staggered over to the theatre. The janitor let me in the side door, saying nothing, a strange look on his face.

"Mr. Callaway! What are you doing here? Shouldn't you be out on the stage?" It was Willy.

"What do you mean? Who's doing my part tonight?"

"Why, you are. I mean, aren't you?"

"No. I've been asleep since dinner break."

"But I saw you putting on your makeup. I mean, if that's not you out there, who is it?"

I stumbled into the wings, leaving a confused stage crew behind me. They were already well into the last scene. People in the wings gaped, looking from me to the stage and back again. There was someone out there in my costume, but it didn't look like me. Not to me, anyway.

"The King, the King's to blame," Laertes said.

"The point envenomed too?" There was bitterness and triumph in Hamlet's voice. "Then, venom, to thy work." And he stabbed the king, Bob Hantover.

Hantover's eyes opened wide, and he stared at the new Hamlet with sudden recognition. "Walter!" he said, departing from the script, and then fell over. The stage erupted in pandemonium. "The curtain! Pull the curtain!" the stage manager cried, and the curtain slowly, ponderously came down.

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The stage looked like a New York street after someone had been hit by a car: practically everyone standing around, dumbfounded and unwilling to get involved, while two or three actors (all college kids, I noticed) were trying to revive poor Bob Hantover. When I joined the crowd, someone asked me how I had gotten into my street clothes so fast.

That's when we all noticed the Hamlet costume lying on the stage next to Bob Hantover.

Hantover was dead, of course. The local doctor who examined him found only a slight scratch from the sword. The police chief confiscated the sword and reported a day later that there was no poision on it. Official cause of death: heart attack.

So it was clear, even without the testimony of the stage crew that I had been in the wings when it had all happened. The similar testimony of the janitor, of course, counted for much more. The townspeople accepted the incident much more easily than the cast did.

Kirchner was finally forced to cancel the remaining two performances of *Hamlet* in East Hicksburg but, when we left, we left the flu behind us.

I learned from the janitor that Bob Hantover's wife had previously been married to the man who had been murdered twenty years earlier. I guess that put the final lid on things. If you believe in ghosts, that is.

—GRANT CARRINGTON

To Whom It May Concern (cont. from page 109)

It was actually my crazy daughter who got this idea of writing a letter, wrapping it in a piece of plastic, and flushing it down the toilet in the hopes that someone interested in pollution will find us and get us out of here. I hope to God it doesn't stop up the plumbing, we should only be rescued soon!

It isn't even the food or the loneliness that's the worst of it though, bad as they are. It's the way they won't let you sleep. Every hour, day and night, weekends and holidays, they blow these enormous horns that could burst your eardrums, and start singing and dancing and carrying *on* in honor of the new High-As-A-Mountain-Guru, *My Grandson!*

Harry Krishna, Harry Krishna
Krishna Krishna, Harry Harry

Until you could practically die. And there's only one consolation. Little Harry himself. I live for the moment when he finishes his studies each day and comes running for a treat from Grandma.

He climbs in my lap and puts one chubby arm around my neck. And another chubby arm, and another chubby arm and another . . . .

Mark of Krishna, indeed! I *told* them it was a minor defect, easily corrected by surgery. But talking to them is like talking to a wall.

—GRANIA D. DAVIS

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fantasy books

Reviewed by Fritz Leiber

LOVECRAFT: A BIOGRAPHY, by L. Sprague de Camp, Doubleday, 1975, $10.00, 526 pages, illustrated

LOVECRAFT AT LAST, by H. P. Lovecraft and Willis Conover, Carrollton-Clark (9122 Rosslyn, Arlington, VA, 22209), 1975, $19.75, 310 pages, illustrated

Thirty-eight years after his death, Howard Phillips Lovecraft emerges as the best American writer of supernatural horror stories since Poe and Bierce, and clearly the equal of the British authors he ranked high above himself: Arthur Machen, Algernon Blackwood, and M. R. James. (I prefer the long-established usage "supernatural horror" to August Derleth's "macabre fantasy," which de Camp follows. The macabre is a narrower vein of fantasy, originally meaning "suggestive of the Dance of Death" and always indicative of preoccupation with death and the gruesome, something more applicable, say, to Clark Ashton Smith's stories, or many of Poe's, or Grand Guignol in general, than to the majority of Lovecraft's.)

His first biography, I'm happy to report, is everything such a book should be. It puts *the facts* about Lovecraft's life and writings into order and uncovers a wealth of new ones, presents Lovecraft's ideas and changing prejudices in the light of their times and his conservative New England background, and is everywhere illuminated by de Camp's sound common sense, conscientious scholarship, and impatience with cloudy thinking. His own *evaluations* of Lovecraft, which many will doubtless dispute, he clearly labels as such.

Let's sample the new facts de Camp has researched.

Lovecraft's finances: His personal capital, $12,500 in 1921, had shrunk to $500 by 1937. During his last decade, three fourths of his writing income came from ghosting.

Lovecraft's "revisionist" clients, hitherto a shadowy group, are fleshed out delightfully: the plump divorcée Hazel Heald, for whom he wrote the purely Lovecraftian "The Horror in the Museum," who tried to woo HPL with candlelight (he dodged); the attractive, thirtyish, but stingy Zelia Reed (Bishop), for whom he wrote "The Curse of Yig" based on her sketchy outline (*Weird Tales* paid her $165, she gave him $15.50 and was still owing him for other work when he died; later she sold "The Mound," another of his jobs); the folksy self-help lecturer David Van Bush, who gave on-stage demonstrations of delirium tremens complete with pink snakes, but paid well and promptly (as did Houdini); Adolphe de Castro, one-time crony of Bierce, genial and

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charming but "a bit of a faker" (Lovecraft got $16 for rewriting a de Castro story that sold for $175).

Lovecraft's discomfort at the least cold: He likely suffered from poikilothermism, a rare but recognized malady, in which the victim's body "assumes the temperature of its surroundings, as if he were a reptile or a fish."

His horror of the sea: "mere histrionics. . .he delighted in the few steamship voyages he took into the open sea." (De Camp quotes his letters.)

His father's syphilis? Most likely, but not completely proven. In the 1890's some doctors still used the term "paresis" for any paralysis.

His own, inherited? Utterly unlikely. None of the symptoms. No evidence whatever.

Homosexuality? Extremely unlikely, even the latent sort. Again de Camp quotes HPL's letters tellingly.

That Lovecraft was offered the editorship of *Weird Tales* and turned it down: Although there was talk of this and Lovecraft avowed his hatred of having to move to Chicago, there was never a hard-and-fast offer nor a definite refusal. This is an example of the thoroughness and tenacity with which de Camp has pursued his research. He has also worked hard to track down August Derleth's favorite "quote" from Lovecraft: "All my stories. . .are based on the fundamental lore or legend that this world was inhabited at one time by another race who, in practicing black magic, lost their foothold and were expelled, yet live on outside. . ." De Camp shows that Derleth's memory may well have been at fault, but only in the list of errata in the first printing which he is preparing does he hit on the document Derleth was misquoting—a letter from Lovecraft to Farnsworth Wright: "All my tales are based on the fundamental premise that common human laws and emotions have no validity or significance in the cosmos-at-large. . ."

Despite such expert strokes, the book can be read with understanding by someone who knows little or nothing of Lovecraft and supernatural horror fiction. De Camp explains as he goes along and gives the gist of stories interestingly.

De Camp does rather *nag* posthumously at Lovecraft, especially for his impracticalities and affectations as a writer, but *they were there* and were also always underplayed by Derleth, as were Lovecraft's self-doubts. Only occasionally does de Camp, to my mind, go too far, as when he says "*Supernatural Horror in Literature* is a compilation of the sort that any professor of English literature could do." Not any English professor *I* know of—moreover, Lovecraft's later stories obviously profited from the reading and thinking he did for the essay.

Or when after castigating "The Silver Key," although "the writing is highly skilled," as "an orgy of self-pitying narcissism" (okay, a matter of evaluation—de Camp's privilege) he goes on to describe as "far superior" and "a sound, taut story" and "a good piece of entertainment" its sequel, "Through the Gates of the Silver Key," by Lovecraft and E. Hoffman Price. To me, "Gates" is nothing of the sort, but a ponderous tale that never comes alive, as near to a non-story as Lovecraft ever had a hand in—he labors prodigiously to justify a very uncongenial mystical plot ("god-like surges of deadly sweetness") that probably came mostly from Price.

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Only the exotic frame is limpingly effective.

Or when he says, "The Cthulhu Mythos stories do not form a consistent whole, because Lovecraft never worked out his assumptions in detail." The suggestion here *appears* to be that a less impractical and more workmanlike writer would have worked out all those assumptions in the first place, made sure they all hung together, and then written those stories biff-bang-bing. But really good fantasy (supernatural horror, sword and sorcery, whimsy, or whatever) does not always or even generally grow in such a neat and sensible fashion. The businesslike one-two-three method is not apt to achieve a sense of "the strange reality of the unreal," but rather the cut-and-dried romps lacking real emotional content that make up so much of modern fantasy—"good entertainment," if you're fairly easily pleased and don't expect to be deeply moved. But the truth remains: A writer simply can't write about the unknown impressively enough to fill a reader with fear and wonder, if he decides at the beginning that he knows all about it.

But here we approach matters of *evaluation* again, which always (be it remembered) must begin with facts and stay firmly hooked to them, and it is the facts, well ordered, which de Camp has given us.

Among those myriad facts: Three months before he died, Lovecraft was sent for Christmas a human skull from an Indian burial mound by a young, new correspondent, Willis Conover. This bright 16-year-old had got hold of and wished to publish a long, autobiographical and truly very affected letter Lovecraft had written to Edwin Baird, editor of *Weird Tales*, in 1924. Six weeks before he died, Lovecraft vetoed the project.

So far, de Camp. It puts Conover into perspective—one more of Lovecraft's last correspondents. Their exchange of letters began in July 1936 eight months before his death (exactly the same time my own correspondence with Lovecraft began) when Conover wrote soliciting material for an amateur magazine, the *Science-Fantasy Correspondent*.

Conover held on to his own Lovecraft letters (highly commendable!), went on to become the world-renowned jazz expert of Voice of America, discovered through a chance encounter that Lovecraft was world-famous too ("Much of this was news to me."), decided to publish the correspondence along with related materials and has now done so in a novel manner: to get the illusion of an actual conversation with Lovecraft (something he strongly felt himself when he originally read the letters), he has rearranged the order of the statements in them, so that question (by Conover) is always immediately followed by answer (by Lovecraft). To me this makes Lovecraft sound like a combination of tireless, infallible sage and yes-man (for he's always very polite about the teenager's magazine and editorial ambitions) but it does produce a certain quick continuity. Lovecraft's words are "virtually unedited," but Conover's own have been "pruned or amended."

Now some scholars may yowl at this, but as I see it the letters are essentially Conover's (although the law makes them the writer's, I'm told) and he has every right to publish them in whatever form he wants to. After all, even the multi-volume *Selected Letters* are slanted by what

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Derleth (and Wandrei) decided to excerpt from them, and as for signing a book "by H. P. Lovecraft and," at least there are lots of sentences and paragraphs by Lovecraft in this one, which is more than can be said for Derleth's posthumous collaborations with him. (But Conover should make all the unedited, unpruned, and unamended letters available to serious scholars—that's only fair.)

The wonder is how delightfully this book conveys, despite all editorial oddities, the amazing impact of Lovecraft in his letters. Clearly, his later emotional life was entirely there. He readies and freshens himself for each new correspondent as for a lover and courts him or her assiduously, tenderly, and with great imagination. And he continues to do it even when mortally ill.

He is unfailingly polite to the teenage Conover, answers every question in full, never talks down to him, takes all of his literary and publishing ambitions seriously, in fact treats him as if he were the editor of a big national magazine, uses the greatest tact in inculcating good ideas and worthy ambitions, gayly joins in and plays along with all his jokes and bumptious inventions (a pet ghoul named Little Howard), and in general makes him feel what a grand thing it is to be in this fantasy game together.

Specifically, he responds to Conover's camp teenage witticisms about Yog-Sothoth's sex life by unflinchingly joking about the monster's marriage to Shub-Niggurath, their brats, and his various byblows.

He listens tirelessly to Conover's *dreams*, which include one beauty, "The Hidden Room," which Lovecraft rightly avises turning into a story, and one very Jungian one about Conover and Robert Bloch clutching a limb over a precipice and Lovecraft rescuing them.

On Conover's instructions, he sends congratulations to another young writer on his first professional sale (incidentally revealing that he never read magazine science fiction).

He approves a Cthulhu Mythos book Conover invents, the *Ghorl Nigral* by Herrman Mulder. (Not bad.)

Also at Conover's request, he sends him a page of authographs to be cut up and sold to help finance the magazine, though warning him not to get his hopes of financial return too high.

He listens seriously to Conover's dreams of 5,000-copy fanzine issues.

And under this unstinting shower of response, young Conover blossoms, he loosens up, his writing improves, even becomes somewhat Lovecraftian. And he even rejects Lovecraft's story "The Tree"—"Incredible," as today's Conover observes.

Now all this is a perfect example of the sort of almost masochistic thing de Camp rightly shakes his head at (and I don't approve at all myself): Lovecraft lavishing on juvenile projects energy that could have gone into sensible, adult, possibly remunerative writing. Yet, that was Lovecraft, busy creating a deathless impression even while he was dying. (Poor, brave guy, it probably took his mind off his mortal fears.)

There's more to the book than the shuffled letters, but it doesn't amount to much. The Baird letter is no longer news, since it was printed in 1965 as No. 160 in *Selected Letters I*. While the so-called "new essay" is not in any sense a revision of "Supernatural Horror in Literature," but a 2,000-word synopsis of its first eight chapters,

(cont. on page 128)

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Editorial (cont. from page 4)
naturalistic, with a painstaking attempt to integrate into the narrative the actual lifestyles of the animals in question. Thus, the rabbits of *Watership Down* not only form a fellowship to undertake an (for them) epic journey to a new home—they make this journey as *rabbits* would: travelling in haphazard hops, loosely grouped at best, continually under the stress of fear, ready to startle at any moment, in danger of freezing into the immobility of fear (*tharn*, in Adams' rabbit vocabulary). This is easily Adams' major accomplishment: the integration of quasi-human personalities with natural rabbit mannerisms and modes. The problems the rabbits face in the course of the novel, and their means of dealing with them are not easy translations from human terms: they are rabbits' problems, solved as rabbits might solve them.

Like Tolkien, Adams has built up around his chraracters both maps and languages. The Lapine Glossary at the book's end has over forty words and terms; many are used in the text and occasionally an entire sentence in Lapine is included in the story. I am not a linguist and will leave for others any discussion of the Lapine language and its implications, ramifications, etc.; I did find the words appropriately used in the story and their invention an added value to the book.

Watership Down can be compared with another British work: *Wind in the Willows*. (Again, I am not thinking of those areas of that work which were rather rudely simplified in the Disney movie; I am thinking of the book, and especially those parts of the book, like the chapter, "The Piper at the Gates of Dawn," which explored animal fantasy.) Like *Wind in the Willows*, I expect *Watership Down* will survive many generations of readers, for, like the other, the book explores the interface between both different animals and animals and humans. (Stoats come off rather poorly in both.)

Perhaps one of the most important areas in which *Watership Down* deals with fantasy material is in Adams' creation of Lapine myth. The rabbits are storytellers, and prize good storytellers in their midst. Periodically Adams intersperses one of these stories in his narrative, sometimes devoting an entire chapter to it. In so doing he has created some first-rate fantasy in its own right. For the Lapine myths seek to explain, from the rabbits' point of view, the creation and ordering of the world: the reasons for the rabbits' characteristics and their place in the animal kingdom. The stories begin with "The Story of the Blessing of El-ahrairah;" El-ahrairah is the oldest, the wisest, and the wiliest of rabbits: in rabbit lore he is immortal. The stories are always about El-ahrairah although the settings shift from the Earliest Times down to the almost-present; ultimately Hazel (the primary viewpoint-character of the novel) hears, in his old age, stories about El-ahrairah which seem so familiar that they could almost be about him. Thus we sitness the transformation of the rabbits' experiences into myth, and the way in which by myth the rabbits renew their own knowledge and awareness of themselves.

This is, of course, nothing more or less than we humans do. The oral tradition is the oldest form by which knowledge and insight are passed from generation to generation; rabbit generations come closer than ours and thus offer a microcosmic view. Adams'

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perceptions, then, are ultimately human perceptions: he is not really talking about rabbits. He is talking about us: sentient creatures coping with a universe too large to fully explore or understand, but one in which natural laws appear to operate, if we can only comprehend them.

This is, I need hardly say, the basic function of fantasy itself: to take a specific human experience and to draw from it general observations about the nature of the universe and its metaphysical function, creating in the process a myth of universal applicability.

All of human history has gone into our myths—the universal archetypes of Jung—and once or twice in a generation one of us gives new voice to such a myth, creates a new context in which to experience that myth. This Adams has done. Thus it is no surprise that his book has become bestseller, nor that it will (I am sure) survive to beguile future generations.

—TED WHITE

The Haunted Writing Manual (cont. from page 101)

poems will not put bread on the table. But there is bread to be earned by the shrewd versifiers. . ."

This is stupid, Gaskitt thought, I won't be tricked again. That ghost, old man Flinch, probably levitated the book here just to catch me up another time. However, he continued to read. By the end of the first page his eyelids felt heavy. No, I can't let *that* happen again, mustn't sleep. But the book, or something, was beginning to convince him that maybe Isaac had the right idea. Maybe I could become a poet. Maybe not, but I got to write *something*. Or I got to shake this curse. Damn Richard Harwood Flinch anyway! I can't stand this having words bounce around inside my head.

He let the rhythm of the bouncing words lull him to sleep.

Awake, he felt the same, yet different. He grabbed one of the pencils which hung by chains at every reading desk, and began to write on the flyleaf of *How to Write for Big Money*.

After hastily scribbling one line of poetry, he dropped the pencil.

There were other lines in his mind, but he could tell just by looking at the eleven wrods he had written that he had been right in the first place, when he'd told Isaac he was not cut out to be a poet.

Reading the words again, he laughed to himself about his quickly-dashed hopes, and felt marvelously free of all writing instincts. He took the pencil and, slowly, in heavy strokes which completely obliterated the letter, crossed out his one fling at verse:

"Once upon a midnight drizzly, as I pondered weak and weary."

—ROBERT THURSTON

ON SALE IN NOVEMBER AMAZING—AUG. 28th

BEST SELLING JOE HALDEMAN'S greatest new short novel, **YOU CAN NEVER GO BACK,** plus other outstanding new stories and features.

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Letters intended for publication should be typed, double-spaced, on one side of each sheet, and addressed to *According To You,* Box 409, Falls Church, Va. 22046.

Elsewhere in this issue, Fritz Leiber reviews Willis Conover's Lovecraft At Last. *In the letter below, Conover responds to an advance copy of that review.*—TW

Dear Mr. Leiber:

Thank you for reviewing *Lovecraft at Last* and for sending me a copy of your review. It was balanced, fair, and readable.

If I had any sense at all I'd add "Sincerely," now, sign my name, and mail this. But if I'd had any sense I wouldn't have committed myself to five years of working on the book: three years writing, co-editing, co-designing, and co-publishing, and two years (starting now) trying to sell it and pay off the loan. While this has nothing to do with anyone's opinion of the product, it may explain why I've decided to run on a bit beyond simply acknowledging your courtesy.

As I said, your review was fair—insofar as the galleys represented the book. Only 10 of the book's 57 illustrations came with the galleys. None of the 10 reproduced HPL's handwriting in its original color [*In blue ink.*—TW] as the book does. Not a minor point, and not simply extravagant design. Since the book is meant to give a reader the *experience* of communicating with HPL, the reader must "receive" the letters. The device may not work for you, but I wish you could have had the finished book to review. (Not your fault you didn't.)

As for shuffling parts of the letters, I wanted something more than a plush variation on the Arkham House series for Lovecraft scholars and a lot more than *The Letters of . . .* for nonspecialist readers. The editing is novel, as you say, but I can't agree that it's odd.

Lovecraft's words *are* virtually unedited in *Lovecraft at Last.* Shuffling a set of questions and a set of responses achieves what Lovecraft and Conover were trying for within the limitations of postal communication: several sets of question-and-response. The resulting transcript is more accurate than transcripts of half-remembered *conversations* with HPL, yet this is a dialogue too. (For Scholars, the book notes the calendar locations of all sentences HPL wrote; the galleys didn't include these notes.)

"As for signing a book by H.P. Lovecraft and,' at least there are lots of sentences and paragraphs by Lovecraft in this one. . ." Hell, there are lots more than "lots": *half* the

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book, give or take a page or so, is by HPL.

"The Baird letter is no longer news. . ." Maybe not to you, although the version in *Selected Letters* was inaccurate and incomplete. But it will be news to many readers who never heard of *Selected Letters* or Arkham House, who number far more than the present relatively tight circle of Lovecraftians. Because it was news to the teenage Conover it's an important part of the *experience and the story*. After 13 years it was even news to Lovecraft. The Baird letter reviews biographical statistics and early attitudes that should be in any memoir of Lovecraft; best of all, in echoing HPL's early affections, the Baird letter sets up the immature HPL—the person too many people still think was the only HPL—and lets the mature HPL demolish him. Thank God.

You may be right in preferring "synopsis" (of *Supernatural Horror in Literature*) to "revision." HPL says, however (p. 145): "What good will a merely nominal skeleton synopsis do? What advantage has a brief, uninformative *paragraph* ((my italics.—WC)) over nothing at all? A person either has or hasn't seen the *Fantasy Fan* installments. If he has, he doesn't want *any* synopsis. If he hasn't, he won't get much good from anything not detailed enough to round out a picture which will match well with the coming sections. Well, in the end I prepared this condensation. . ."

HPL suggest here that "synopsis" is too restricting a word. Even as a *condensation* (of closer to 2,500 words, not 2,000), the piece is detailed and it repeats nothing in the original. If "revision" isn't perfect, neither is your "not in any sense a revision."

"There's more to the book than the shuffled letters, but it doesn't amount to much." Again, the galleys gave only the text—the meat and potatoes, with no salt, no spices, no sauces, no setting, no music.

On my making available all the unedited, unpruned, and unamended letters: In a 60,000-word book, only about 50 words by HPL are missing. Out of pity for the reader, I wouldn't think of subjecting anyone today to all of *my* adolescent claptrap. I left in enough to provide continuity, and to avoid the charge of trying to improve my mid-1930s image; but that's it. Have a heart!

In your accompanying note you say: "He surely was a wonderful man. He really had a big influence on my life, in the direction of writing more carefully and honestly, the idea of writers helping each other, . . . etc." This is warmer than the relatively olympian tone of the words you prepared for publication. Even though you have written elsewhere of HPL's influence on your life, mentioning it again would have been especially appropriate in reviewing the somewhat similar experience of HPL that another youngster was having while you were having yours.

WILLIS CONOVER
Carrollton-Clark
9122 Rosslyn
Arlington, Va., 22209

Willis recently showed me an unassembled copy of his book, and I found it physically impressive (I've not yet had the chance to read it) in terms of design and organization. There are many reproductions of actual letters, postcards, etc., with HPL's handwriting printed in blue ink (the text duplicates the letters for those who have

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trouble with the handwriting), and I believe Willis is being fair in describing the entire book as an experience *in which one vicariously participates. Typographically, the book is very handsome—perhaps the most so of any recent example of bookmaking I've encountered.*—TW

Dear Mr. White

I was surprised, disappointedly surprised but surprised none the less, when I picked up the latest issue (June 1975) of FANTASTIC. The reasons were simple: "Dorian Hawkmoon returns in *Count Brass* by Michael Moorcock" on the cover, and "DARIAN HAWKMOON RETURNS in MICHAEL MOORCOCK'S THRILLING NEW NOVEL, COUNT BRASS", on the contents page.

Really? His "NEW NOVEL"? My copy (Which I purchased here in the USA) is printed by Mayflower Books and is copyrighted 1973 and is paperbound. Besides that, Moorcock has had three novels, at the least, published since then: *Champion of Garathorm, The Land Leviathan,* and *The Hollow Lands.* Furthermore one of these, *Champion of Garathorm,* is the sequel to the novel you are serializing. I buy FANTASTIC in order to read new fantasy, not some that I read over a year ago. If you have some explanation, I would be interested in hearing it.

One further question. Why no mention of the fact that *Count Brass* is being serialized, on the cover or on the title page?

MICHAEL TAYLOR
2523 14th Ave. NW
Gig Harbor, Wash. 98335

My apologies to you and to any among our other readers for whom "Count Brass" was not a new novel, but this was a mixup in foreign and domestic publication of the novel. The Mayflower edition which you refer to was published in England and should not have been circulated in North America. Sale of that edition in the United States is expressly forbidden by law. Here in the U.S. the book is to be published (may have been published, by the time you read this) by Dell Books, which controls all domestic book rights. When we bought the novel (in manuscript form, from Moorcock's U.S. agent), it was with the assumption that it would be new to our readers, and we presented it as such (with two really fine covers by Harry Roland) in good faith. As for omitting mention that the novel was being serialized, that was an oversight on our part (but the title page of the story, on page 6, clearly stated, "First of Two Parts").—TW

Dear Ted,

The June FANTASTIC contained a well balanced package of fiction, features and artwork. I continue to find Mike Nally's work to be among the best you've used. He has a way with a line. Especially if that line be part of some exotic beauty. His art is sensual. It is also uncannily precise.

As for the fiction, it was not as good as the previous issue's fare, but still well above average on the whole. I like Robert T. Young's *Perchance to Dream* much more than *Techmech.* However, the former story was an arresting vignette on the interface between modern sculpture and electronic technology. The artist's creation was neither fiend nor savior which was a refreshing switch on the usual outcome of such stories. I was glad that

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he at least got away from the hoary old Frankenstein's monster theme.

Rich Brown's story of Jack was my favorite. The ending was whimsical to fit the whimsy-is-as-whimsy-does character development and plotline. It developed organically from the rest of the story so that the final event seemed in line with the rest of the story. Undoubtedly, Rich has a future as the Pied Piper of Fantasia land. I like the tune he plays. Fact is, the kind of story he does is much more effective than most other subgenres I've appreciated in the fantasy tradition. But that's my prejudice. I like stories with sardonic humor and a bit of self-parodying humor.

Jay Haldeman had an interesting theme. Laura is an embodiment of desire. I wouldn't mind meeting her. I'd just hope she'd have mercy on me whoever she is or wherever her homeland might be.

As far as the longer fiction is concerned, I thought Michael Moorcock's sword and sorcery novel seemed rather tame to many I've seen. It also had a lot of different characters which I hope he takes the time to develop more fully in the rest of the novel. The friends of the hero need to be much more than he's shown us thus far. They are almost as insubstantial as the ghosts they purport to me from the past. The time theme is skillfully woven into the basic plotline however. I have a suspicion it will play a major role in the eventual resolution of the work. Hopefully, Moorcock has a twist on it that will make the wait worth it.

I could tell where Howard left off and Carter began in *The Tower of Time* but that really didn't detract from my reading pleasure. Carter's efforts, while they maintain some the resonances in the prose of Howard have a distinctly lighter quality about them. Although he uses the same statuesque kind of prose rhythms that Howard does, they don't quite have the same quality of foreboding heavily that Howard so easily evokes. It was a nice try. I appreciate Carter's efforts in finishing this piece. The more the heirs of the old fantasists try to emulate the better qualities of their work combined with any modern modifications they can provide, produces a hybrid of higher literary value.

Ted, your comments to aspiring authors were very good. I also hope to someday sell my prose for the filthy lucre. I'd really like to eke an existence from something I love rather than live like a king doing dogshit work I loathed. My attitude may not be as serious as it needs to be in order to make print, but in any case I applaud anyone who can make it over-the-transom. It gives other wouldbe writers the impetus to continue. You remember all too well your own early struggles to not be in sympathy with others who would follow your lead.

Alan Bostick should rightly applaud Mike Glicksohn for his satiric look at the faannish letterhack. If you let the frenetic world of fandom become too much of a Thing in your life the parody in Mike Glicksohn's story become a living, breathing self-parody of a real person. It's another example of what can happen if fandom, or for that matter anything, becomes the single focus of a life. At one time I participated in fandom on the level described in the story. I regret the fact. There were other important aspects I was seriously neglecting. When I gafiated I lost sixty pounds, started dating and soon became much

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less a snob looking down on the Mundane World as if it existed merely to hassle me Back to the Perpendicular and Narrow. Fandom is a great place to show creativity and sensitivity to the aesthetic that might otherwise be lost in the humdrum of everyday life. Yet it can become a trap as well as a liberating influence. But that happens only if you let it. I wish someone had been able to wise me up earlier to this fact. As it was I learned the hard way. Now I hope I've profited from my past mistakes. So I take care of faannish fun along with other outlets for the head, and the routine of work people have to learn in order to survive in the US today.

DAVE HULVEY
Rt. 1, Box 198
Harrisonburg, Va. 22801

Dear Ted,

I got a chuckle out of your holier-than-thou putdown of the *Gor* books in the editorial in the August, 1975, FANTASTIC. In the same issue, Fred Patten mentions that your books featuring "strong sword and sorcery" covers outsold other issues, and I recall your making a similar comment about national sales a while ago. Just who do you think it is who buys those issues, if not the same anal-retentive types who go in for bondage and discipline? I don't recall your exact remarks then, but the impression I got was that, esthetically, you'd prefer not to run that sort of thing, but that, economically, it was necessary for survival of the magazine. The only substantial difference between a John Norman *Gor* opus and a Carter/de Camp *Conan* epic (both being the product of reasonably competent wordsmiths writing to a formula) is that, in *Conan*, the heavy sexuality is largely repressed, and manifested through heavy-handed, often morbid or grotesque, symbolism. In regard to artwork, even that difference is gone: the February, 1975, FANTASTIC that Fred mentioned as a hot seller has a cover featuring, in the foreground, a nude woman chained to a rock.

Now, as you well know, Ted, Don Wollheim (Norman's publisher) is no carpetbagger out to make a quick buck selling porn at the expense of the SF and fantasy genre as a whole; and I'm sure his motives in printing *Gor* books are the same as yours in running *Conan:* to pay the bills. If you choose to eschew *Gor*-type material in that pursuit, that's a routine editorial decision; and, if enough readers ask about it, perhaps worth noting in a editorial. But, as long as you run *Conan*, you can hardly throw the first stone.

ERWIN S. STRAUSS
11700 Columbia Pike #809
Silver Spring, MD 20904

I can't agree that there is no real difference between heroic adventure and sadomasochistic masturbation fantasies. Nor do I think Fabian's February cover appeals to the latter audience, inasmuch as the woman is being rescued *by the sword-wielding hero; there is no indication that she is his plaything or property, nor that he intends either torture or rape. (And, although she is obviously nude, her pose reveals few of her "charms" (if I may use a* Gor *word)—not even as much as her breasts as women often reveal in public these days. I see it rather as a variation of the old, time-honored,* BEM/Babe/Bum *covers which*

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long adorned stf and fantasy magazine covers.—TW

Dear Mr. White,

I have been a fan of John Norman's Gor series since it began in 1966. Over the years I have corresponded with him several times, offering suggestions, and he has always responded courteously. I am sorry you do not like the series, but that does not matter. What does very much matter is your proceeding to classify John Norman, myself and at least several thousand other readers who enjoy his novels as a bunch of perverts. Fantasy is a wide ranging field. There are many new wave style writers I can't enjoy, but I would never insult them as you did readers of the Gor series.

Twenty centuries ago, the greatest society in the western world was Rome. In that society a rich patrician could readily go to the forum and buy a slavegirl in precisely the same manner as, in Norman's series, a person might buy a girl in the Curulean in the city of Ar. The warriors code of Gor is not unlike the medieval concept of chivalry, absent the Christian influence. On Gor men are rigidly divided into castes of warriors, merchants, scribes, builders, etc., yet this is not greatly unlike the Hindu caste system as it existed for centuries before the current one.

Skip the sex scenes if they bother you, and read about the great tarn race in Ar in *Assasin of Gor*, an event comparable to the chariot race in Ben Hur. L. Sprague De Camp said the following about *Nomads of Gor* in issue 52 of *Amra*, "there's humor (rare in the genre) There is a realistic picture of barbarian life (obviously based on our own Turco-Tatar peoples). And the nomadic chieftain, Kamchak, is worth the price of admission by himself."

Does this make Mr. DeCamp a pervert along with the rest of us? In this unisex society of lady machinists, plumbers and wrestlers, it is really so terrible to enjoy a fantasy novel about a world where men and women have separate and distinct roles? Where there is a machismo similar to that in Latin America today where a male is taught from boyhood to master a female.

By the way, male supremacy has not completely conquered, as in the northern forests there are panther girls who reverse the process, capturing and enslaving men to serve their pleasure. I submit that in a non-industrial world where wars are fought with spears and swords, sex differences and slavery for the vanquished would not be unusual, in fiction or reality.

I have always liked Burrough's John Carter of Mars books. They seem the standard by which contemporary heroic fiction can be judged. Yet doesn't it seem somewhat unrealistic that first an evil prince, and later a mad scientist, would capture Dejah Thoris, the fairest woman in two worlds, hold her prisoner for months, and yet never sexually touch her. These are villains? The standard is followed in such recent novels as *Sky Pirates of Callisto* by Lin Carter, where the beauteous Darloona is held captive by evil prince Thuton, who never gets around to using her. I am not faulting Lin Carter, an author I very much admire. What I am saying is that John Norman is not perverted by recognizing that in a real situation of that sort, the captured heroine would be raped, as happened to Tarl Cabot's

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first love, Talena.

Gorean society does not advance technologically because a race of multibrained insects, the priest kings, use their mysterious flame death to destroy humans who work in forbidden areas. Would we have nuclear weapons, or even rifles, today if their inventors knw they were likely to face a fiery agonizing death from an unknown source, a mysterious power considered as gods by the men of their world. Perhaps not. A race older and wiser than men could control the lines of human development, allowing great advances in such fields as medicine and architecture, yet, through fear, inhibiting research in other fields like weaponry.

I do not expect you to ever like the Gor series. I never did expect to see a Norman story published in Fantastic. What I do expect, in a field with such widely divergent talents as R. A. Lafferty, Joanna Russ, Lin Carter and Ray Bradbury, is that you recognise that people like myself and other fans of John Norman's writing are not a bunch of sick perverts drooling dizzily from one scene to the next. Any type of society is possible on a fantasy world, from hobbits to Barsoomian Tharks to Gorean city states, and perhaps an editor should not reject out of hand as "perverted" a fantasy way of life that does not agree with his personal social outlook. I will continue to prefer the fantasy world of Tarl Cabot and Marlenus to the reality of Hitler and Stalin and the computerized society making punchcards of human beings. On Gor, a pretty girl may be enslaved, but she is loved, not pushed aside to watch a football game.

DOUGLAS W. JUSTICE
2154 East Ridge Rd.
Rochester, N.Y., 14622

Of course I'm aware of the historical situations you've described, and I am aware of how "barbarians" have traditionally treated their slaves. (Check my own novel, Phoenix Prime *(1966) for my own use of such material.) But I do not feel that John Norman's presentation of slavery, rape or torture has been made in this context: he reveals no insights into the human condition. He does not appear to comprehend the* effects *such attitudes and treatment would have upon his characters. His narrator (*not *of Gor; a transplanted character whose attitudes might be assumed to have been formed before he entered the series) accepts his own role unquestioningly. He enjoys torturing and raping women, and the reader is expected to enjoy it with him, accepting his point of view. I feel this is a sick attitude—on the part of the author—and one which links him directly to sadomasochistic pornography. His presentation is* not *realistic; it is simplistic and appears (if his non-fiction is any indication) to be a reflection of the author's own fantasies. I do regard those fantasies as "perverted" and I wonder if you honestly agree that the best thing a man can do with a woman who is in his power is to torture her until she is willing to assent to what would otherwise be rape—and if you think that most women, so-treated, would enjoy the experience? If you do, further discussion of this point is impossible; I would prefer to think that your enjoyment of the* Gor *novels is based on other aspects of those works. (I'm told earlier* Gor *novels were of more intrinsic worth than recent ones.) I can assure you that if a fantasy writer published a novel in which black people were presented as basically inferior to whites, appeared to enjoy their slave status, and were tor-*

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tured and raped by the narrator (with the author's obvious approval), my reaction would be every bit as strong, and totally unmitigated by the historical occurrence of such situations —TW

The Wedding of Ova Hamlet (cont. from page 93)

Hudson-Essex-Terraplane Club pulled up and leaped out of their respective Hudsons, Essexes and Terraplanes just in time to see a crooked toupee float to the surface of the olympic size swimming pool and bob there briefly. A couple of bubbles of hot air slurped up around the edges of the toupee with what might be described as a whining sound and then the toupee sank again, sliding along the edge of the big front roller of the 60-ton Bucyrus-Erie and then settling onto the turquoise colored porcelain tile bottom of the pool.

That's all.

That's the end of it.

But there's a lesson that we can learn from the entire incident, if we try hard to understand everything that happened and why it happened that way and how it might have happened differently. The lesson that we can learn is this:

It if hadn't been for that gearshift handle in the 1947 Hudson Business Coupe being where it was, things might have been different. If the Hudson could have up-shifted without assistance from Kitty T's hand, it would have distanced the Bucyrus-Erie easily and Rupert Linwood the SFPA goon would probably never have wound up pinned beneath his own steamroller at the bottom of the Tivoli Gardens Motel swimming pool.

But at it happens the 1947 Hudson came equipped only with a manual transmission.

So in a peculiar sort of way, the transmission of the 1947 Hudson gets the credit for ridding the world of a whining goon.

Don't that just tread on your corns?

—ADDISON STEELE II

Fantasy Books (cont. from page 118)

which Lovecraft wrote at his own suggestion three months before he died to help out Conover, who was planning to publish the last two chapters in full.

Early humorous squibs by Bloch and Donald Wollheim are amusing memorabilia.

The book closes with three grim, facsimile, black-bordered hammer blows: a card with two sentences scrawled in pencil, his last attempt to communicate with Conover, and two letters from Mrs. Gamwell, telling of her nephew's hospitalization and death.

—FRITZ LEIBER

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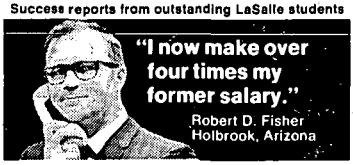

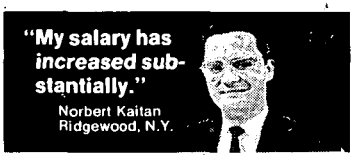

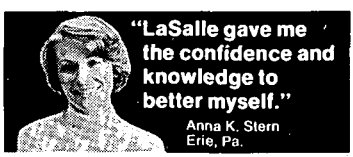

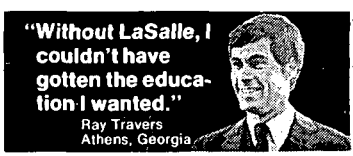

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